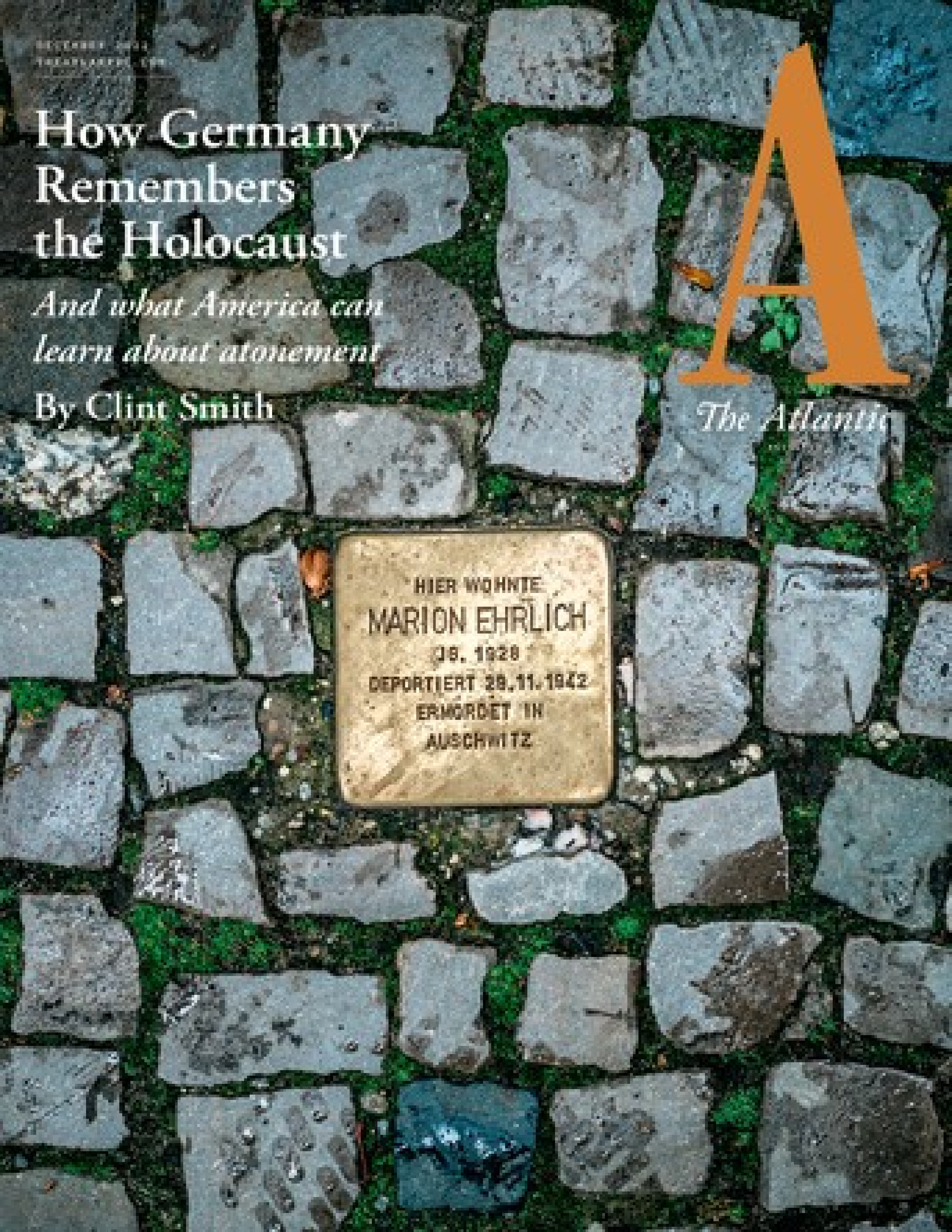


How Germany Remembers the Holocaust

And what America can learn about atonement

By Clint Smith

A

The Atlantic

VISIT…

LANZAROTE Caliente.COM

The Atlantic

[Fri, 02 Dec 2022]

- Cover Story
- Features
- Dispatches
- Culture & Critics
- Departments
- Poetry

Cover Story

- **Monuments to the Unthinkable**

Monuments to the Unthinkable

America still can’t figure out how to memorialize the sins of our history. What can we learn from Germany?

by Clint Smith



The Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial site, in southern Germany (Marc Wilson for The Atlantic)

Updated at 1:20 p.m. ET on November 17. 2022.

The first memorials to the Holocaust were the bodies in concentration camps.

In January 1945, Soviet forces liberated Auschwitz, in southern Poland. As the German forces retreated, officers at Buchenwald, a camp in central Germany, crammed 4,480 prisoners into some 40 railcars in an effort to hide them from the Allies. They sent the train south to yet another camp: Dachau. Only a fifth of the prisoners survived the three-week journey.

When Dachau was liberated in April and American forces came upon the railcars near the camp, they found corpses packed on top of one another. Soldiers turned their heads and covered their noses as the sight and smell of the bodies washed over them. They vomited; they cried.

Dachau was about 10 miles northwest of Munich, and was the first concentration camp built by the Nazi regime. It had operated as a training center for SS guards and served as the prototype for other camps. Its prisoners were subjected to hard labor, corporal punishment, and torturous medical experiments. They were given barely any food; they died from disease and malnutrition, or they were executed. In Dachau’s 12 years of existence, approximately 41,500 people had been killed there and in its subcamps. Many were burned in the crematorium or buried, but thousands of corpses remained aboveground.

The American soldiers wondered how this could have happened. How thousands of people could have been held captive, tortured, and killed at the camp, while just outside its walls was a small town where people were going about their lives as if impervious to the depravity taking place inside. Buying groceries, playing soccer with their children, drinking coffee with their neighbors. German people, the Americans reasoned, should have to see what had been done in their name.

And so the soldiers brought a group of about 30 local officials to the camp. When they arrived on that spring day, they saw piles of bodies, mountains of rotting flesh. They also saw thousands of emaciated survivors emerging from the barracks—“walking skeletons,” as many soldiers described them, barely holding on to life. Later, American soldiers ordered farmers and local residents who were members of the Nazi party to bury some 5,000 corpses.

This is how they were made to bear witness. This is how they were made to remember.

To hear more about our December cover story, join Clint Smith in conversation with The Atlantic*'s editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, on Friday, November 18, at 1 p.m. ET. Register here.*

The mass burial was one of the first acts of constructing public memory in a country that has been navigating questions of how to properly remember the Holocaust ever since.

Today, Dachau is a memorial to the evil that once transpired there. Before the pandemic, almost 900,000 people visited every year from all over the world, including many German students. Visitors see the crematorium where bodies were burned, where the smell of smoldering flesh filled the air, where smoke rose through the chimney and lost itself in the sky. They are made to confront what happened, and they realize that it happened not so long ago.

Questions of public memory—specifically how people, communities, and nations should account for the crimes of their past—are deeply interesting to me. Last year I wrote a book, *How the Word Is Passed*, about how different historical sites across the United States reckon with or fail to reckon with their relationship to slavery. As I traveled across the country visiting these places, I found lapses and distortions that would have been shocking if they weren't so depressingly familiar: a cemetery where the Confederate dead are revered as heroes; a maximum-security prison built on top of a former plantation, where prisoners were once tasked with building the deathbed upon which executions would take place; a former plantation where Black employees were once made to dress as enslaved people and give tours to white visitors.

From the June 2021 issue: Clint Smith on why Confederate lies live on

During my travels I often thought of Germany, which is frequently held up as an exemplar of responsible public memory. From afar, it seemed that the Germans were doing a much better job than we were at confronting the past.

But the more I invoked Germany, the less comfortable I felt drawing comparisons between America and a place I barely knew. So over the past year I made two trips to Germany, traveling to Berlin and to Dachau, visiting sites that only eight decades ago were instrumental to an industrialized slaughter of human beings unlike any the world had ever seen. I learned that the way the country remembers this genocide is the subject of ongoing debate—a debate that is highly relevant to fights about public memory taking place in the U.S.

In recent years, Americans have seen a shift in our understanding of the country's history; many now acknowledge the shameful episodes of our past alongside all that there is to be proud of. But reactionary forces today are working with ever-greater fervor to prevent such an honest accounting from taking place. State legislatures across the country are attempting to prevent schools from teaching the very history that explains why our country looks the way it does. School boards are banning books that provide historical perspectives students might not otherwise encounter.

Many of these efforts are carried out in the name of "protecting" children, of preventing white people from feeling a sense of guilt. But America will never be the country it wants to be until it properly remembers what it did (and does) to Black people. This is why I went looking for lessons in Germany. Sometimes, I found, these lessons are elusive. Sometimes they're not.

I saw that Germany's effort to memorialize its past is not a project with a specific end point. Some people I spoke with believe the country has done enough; others believe it never can. Comparisons to the United States are helpful, but also limited.

Soon, those who survived the Holocaust will no longer be with us. How will their stories be told once they are gone? Germans are still trying to figure out how to tell the story of what their country did, and simultaneously trying to figure out who should tell it.

On a cool October morning, I walked with Frédéric Brenner to Gleis 17, or track 17, of Berlin's Grunewald station, the primary train platform from which Jews in Berlin were sent to the camps in Eastern Europe.

Brenner, a photographer known for his portraits of Jewish communities, has spent more than 40 years traveling the world to document the Jewish diaspora, and a few years ago settled in Berlin with his wife, Hetty Berg, a Dutch woman who now serves as the director of the city's Jewish museum.

Originally, Brenner told me, he had not wanted to come to Germany at all. Many of his relatives had been killed by the Nazis. Brenner grew up in France in the years after the Holocaust. "I was raised that we don't go to Germany, we don't buy German, and we don't speak German," he said.



The Polish artist Karol Broniatowski's monument to the people who were deported from the Grunewald train station (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

Yet he was also intrigued by the idea of returning to a country his family had been forced to flee, of not allowing that trauma to exert control over him. It had not been easy. "My father will not come and see me here," he said. His father's father had been one of six siblings, and only three survived the Holocaust. Brenner placed his hands in his pockets and shook his head, almost in disbelief at himself. "I never thought I would come back." In a

2021 exhibition and accompanying book called *Zerheilt: Healed to Pieces*, Brenner used Berlin as a setting to explore Jewish life.

The houses in Grunewald, the neighborhood where we were walking, were large and elegant, with enormous windows that invited in the sun. “These are the homes the Jews were taken from,” Brenner told me. Men, women, and children had been forced to march down these streets to the train platform and sent to their death. Most of them were made to pay for their own “tickets.”

As we approached the station, we saw a concrete wall etched with silhouettes—a monument to the people who had been deported, designed by the Polish artist Karol Broniatowski and unveiled in 1991.

I walked past the monument and up onto the Gleis 17 platform. I looked down. Lining the tracks were steel plates. Each one had the date of a train’s departure, the number of Jewish people on board, and the camp they were sent to. I walked up to the edge of one section and read the date: 1.3.1943.

Next to the date I saw 36 JUDEN, meaning that 36 Jews had been deported on that day. Next to the number, the steel plate read berlin - auschwitz. I tried to imagine those people—maybe eight or nine families—handing over their tickets, being shuffled into the cars, and listening as the heavy doors shut behind them.

I looked down again and used my foot to sweep aside a leaf; I realized that I hadn’t seen the full number. It wasn’t 36 Jews. It was 1,736 Jews.

I stood there and looked at the numbers carved into the plates on either side of me. 1758 JUDEN were deported the next day. 1000 JUDEN had been deported just a few days prior.



Steel plates line the tracks of the Gleis 17 platform. Each plate has the date of a train’s departure, the number of Jewish people on board, and the camp they were sent to. (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

I tried to do the math in my head as my feet followed the chronology beneath them. But there were 186 steel plates, and as the numbers reflecting each day’s human cargo rose and fell—ranging from a few dozen to a few hundred to more than 1,000—it became impossible.

The platform stretched off into the distance in both directions. I craned my neck over the edge and looked down at the train tracks, their weathered steel stained with spots of brown rust. To the right, the tracks were visible until the rail line curved and disappeared into the forest. To the left, the tracks were partially buried beneath a cluster of trees whose thin trunks arched upward into an orange-and-yellow canopy. The trees’ presence was intentional. The trunks growing between the tracks were there to say: No more trains will ever pass here.

This memorial, designed by the architects Nikolaus Hirsch, Wolfgang Lorch, and Andrea Wandel, opened to the public on January 27, 1998: Holocaust Remembrance Day.

I asked Brenner what he felt when standing on this platform and seeing these dates, these numbers, these words. He paused and looked around at the trees above us, his eyes moving slowly back and forth, as if he were searching for the answer in the leaves. "I cannot process it. My mind cannot process it. And obviously"—he wiped at his eyes—"my body *can* process it."

Unfortunately, Brenner said, his experience at Holocaust-memorial sites wasn't always like this. He asked me if I had been to Auschwitz, in Poland. I hadn't. "Don't go there," he said, shaking his head. "People are all with their phones. It should be prevented. And they go"—he raised his hand a few feet from his face and looked at his palm, emulating someone taking a selfie —"'Me in front of the crematorium.' 'Me in front of the ramp.' I mean, it's so obscene."

I walked to the end of the platform to read the final plate. The last train on record left Berlin on March 27, 1945. Eighteen Jewish passengers were sent to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic. Auschwitz had already been liberated by the Soviets by then; a week later, Ohrdruf, a subcamp of Buchenwald, became the first camp liberated by U.S. soldiers. The Germans were in retreat. Dachau would be liberated within weeks. The war in Europe was nearly over. Those 18 people had been so close to avoiding deportation. I wondered whether they had survived.

After Brenner left, I sat down on the platform and let my legs dangle over its edge. Small blue wildflowers sprouted from the cracks in the wooden railroad ties below. From 1941 to 1945, 50,000 people were sent on these tracks to death camps and ghettos farther east. I closed my eyes and pictured soldiers yelling. Children crying. Bodies tussling. Suitcases rattling. I wondered how much the deportees knew about where they were headed when they got on those trains. I wondered how many days they spent inside those railcars. I wondered if they were able to sleep. I thought of my own children. What would I have told them about where we were going? How would I have assuaged their fear? How would I have assuaged my own?

The first time I saw a Stolperstein, I almost walked past without noticing. I was heading back to my hotel after getting some tea at a café, and there they were, two of them. Small, golden cubes laid into a cobblestone sidewalk. They sat adjacent to each other outside what looked like an office building, or maybe a bank. I stepped closer to read what was written on each of them:

HIER WOHNTE
HELMUT HIMPEL
JG. 1907
IM WIDERSTAND
VERHAFTET 17.9.42
HINGERICHTET 13.5.1943
BERLIN-PLÖTZENSEE

HIER WOHNTE
MARIA TERWIEL
JG. 1910
IM WIDERSTAND
VERHAFTET 17.9.42
HINGERICHTET 5.8.1943
BERLIN-PLÖTZENSEE

Hier wohnte … Here lived …

The English translation for *Stolperstein* is “stumbling stone.” Each 10-by-10-centimeter concrete block is covered in a brass plate, with engravings that memorialize someone who was a victim of the Nazis between 1933 and 1945. The name, birthdate, and fate of each person are inscribed, and the stones are typically placed in front of their final residence. Most of the Stolpersteine commemorate the lives of Jewish people, but some are dedicated to Sinti and Roma, disabled people, gay people, and other victims of the Holocaust.

In 1996, the German artist Gunter Demnig, whose father fought for Nazi Germany in the war, began illegally placing these stones into the sidewalk of a neighborhood in Berlin. Initially, Demnig’s installations received little attention. But after a few months, when authorities discovered the small memorials, they deemed them an obstacle to construction work and

attempted to get them removed. The workers tasked with pulling them out refused.

In 2000, Demnig’s Stolperstein installations began to be officially sanctioned by local governments. Today, more than 90,000 stumbling stones have been set into the streets and sidewalks of 30 European countries. Together, they make up the largest decentralized memorial in the world.

Demnig, now 75, spends much of his time on the road, personally installing most of the stones. Since 2005, the sculptor Michael Friedrichs-Friedländer has made the stones. Mass-manufacturing them would feel akin to the mechanized way that the Nazis killed so many millions of people, Demnig and Friedrichs-Friedländer say, so each one is engraved by hand.

I felt drawn to the Stolpersteine, compelled by the work Demnig was trying to do with them, and overwhelmed by how much they captured in such a small space.

The next day I met Barbara Steiner in the city’s Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district. The neighborhood’s narrow streets were lined with five- and six-story buildings whose balconies stretched out over the cobblestone sidewalks. People bundled in coats whizzed past us on bicycles.

Steiner, a convert to Judaism, is a historian and therapist. She has short, jet-black hair. She wore a sky-blue coat and small gold earrings that gleamed when they caught the sun.

“I have a 12-year-old daughter,” Steiner told me as we walked toward a Stolperstein a few meters away, “and whenever we walk in the streets, we stop.” She looked down at the engraved brass in front of us. “She really wants to read every stone.”



Left: Barbara Steiner in Berlin. *Right*: The German artist Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine memorialize victims of the Nazis. (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

"They mean more than those huge things," Steiner said, stretching her arms wide above her head. "I think the huge monuments are always about performing memory, when this is really connected to a person." Steiner likes that you see the names of specific people. She likes that the stones are installed directly in front of the place these individuals once called home. "You can start to think, *How would it have looked for them to live here?* "

Stolpersteine are largely local initiatives, laid because a family, or residents of an apartment complex or neighborhood, got together and decided they wanted to commemorate the people who had once lived there. Steiner said that students at her daughter's school had begun researching the building across the street from the school, and discovered that a number of Jewish families had lived there. Then they applied to have Stolpersteine installed.

Demnig has said that this is the most meaningful aspect of the project for him. He believes that for children and adults alike, 6 million is too abstract a number, and individual stories are more powerful tools than statistics for coming to terms with this history. "Sometimes you need just one fate," he has said, to start thinking about how someone's life relates to your own: Maybe they lived on your street, or were the same age you are now when they were murdered. "Those are the moments I know they will go home as

different people.” Each stone creates its own unofficial ambassadors of memory.

Steiner and I walked a bit farther down the street. She stopped in front of a beige building with a large white archway above a brown door. “I lived here,” she said. I looked at the door, then looked down. Five stumbling stones lay together among the cobblestones, their brass faces shimmering. Steiner translated them into English for me:

> Max Zuttermann. Born 1868.
> Deported October 18, 1941.
> Murdered January 15, 1942.
>
> Gertrud Zuttermann. Born 1876.
> Deported October 18, 1941.
> Murdered December 20, 1941.
>
> Fritz Hirschfeldt. Born 1902.
> Deported October 18, 1941.
> Murdered May 8, 1942.
>
> Else Noah. Born 1873.
> Deported July 17, 1942.
> Murdered March 14, 1944.
>
> Frieda Loewy. Born 1889.
> humiliated/disenfranchised.
> Died by suicide June 2, 1942.

I did the math to estimate how old they might have been when they died: Max Zuttermann, 74. Gertrud Zuttermann, 65. Fritz Hirschfeldt, 40. Else Noah, 71. Frieda Loewy, 53.

I glanced at Steiner; she was still looking down at the stones, her hands in her coat pockets, her legs crossed at her ankles.

I thought about what it must be like to live in a home where you walk past these stones, and these names, every day. I imagined what it might be like if we had something commensurate in the United States. If, in front of homes,

restaurants, office buildings, churches, and schools there were stones to mark where and when enslaved people had been held, sold, killed. I shared this thought with Steiner. “The streets would be packed,” she said.

She was right. I imagined New Orleans, my hometown, once the busiest slave market in the country, and how entire streets would be covered in brass stones—whole neighborhoods paved with reminders of what had happened. New Orleans is, today, at a very different place in its reckoning with the past; it has only recently been focused on removing its homages to enslavers. Over the past few years, the statues of Confederate leaders I grew up seeing have been removed from their pedestals, and streets named after slaveholders have been renamed for local Black artists and intellectuals. My own middle school has a new name as well. As I looked at the stumbling stones beneath me in Berlin, I wondered if there might be a future for them on the streets I rode my bike on growing up.

I asked Steiner how it felt to have these stones here, in front of what was once her home. “My daughter now reads these names and asks herself, *Could this be me?* ” she said. “But what I like is to stand here and think about them, how they might have lived here.”

More Jewish people live in Boston than in all of Germany.

As I looked at the house, I began to imagine who these people could have been. Perhaps Max and Gertrud were married; I pictured them making Shabbat dinner for their adult children on Friday evenings. Perhaps Fritz helped them with their groceries as they made their way up the stairs. Maybe they spoke about what the Zuttermanns planned on cooking, whether they would see one another at synagogue on Saturday. Perhaps Max and Gertrud invited Fritz to join them for their meal. Perhaps they invited Else and Frieda too. Maybe they all sat around the table. Perhaps they laughed. Perhaps they sang. Perhaps they played a game of cards to end the evening. Perhaps, as wax began to collect at the bottom of the small plates that held the candles, they discussed the new laws that were restricting their lives, the rumors of war. Perhaps they asked one another whether they still had time to leave. (I later learned that Max and Gertrud were in fact married, and that Fritz was their subtenant. The Zuttermanns’ two adult daughters, I found, had been able to escape Germany.)

My eyes moved from the building we stood in front of to the buildings adjacent to it. When German Jews were led to the trains for deportation, the block would have been lined with other Germans who watched from their windows, their storefronts, the sidewalk. Maybe some cheered. Most probably said nothing.

Steiner saw me looking at these other buildings and must have realized what I was thinking about. “There’s the relational aspect,” she said. “It was their neighbors that had been murdered. It was their neighbors that had been deported. It was their neighbors that had been thrown out to Auschwitz. It was their neighbors who lost their lives. And we need to understand this. It was not an abstract group.”

So many of Germany’s monuments, I was learning, were not built until long after the war. The first Stolperstein was laid in 1996. The Gleis 17 memorial opened in 1998. The Jewish Museum Berlin opened in 2001. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in Berlin, opened in 2005.

When Steiner was a child, the country’s major sites of memory about the Holocaust were the concentration camps. Her parents had taken her to Dachau when she was very young. She was left haunted and terrified by the experience.

I asked if she had taken her daughter to any camps. She shook her head and told me she thought that, at 12, she was still too young. They had considered going to Auschwitz in the summer, but Steiner had changed her mind, ultimately deciding it wasn’t yet time. Her daughter had read about the Holocaust, and it seemed to have overwhelmed her. She struggled to sleep. “She was worried that if she fell asleep, she might not wake up,” Steiner told me.

Anti-Semitism and racism have been on the rise in Germany in recent years as the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has gained political power; the German government recently reported a 29 percent increase in anti-Semitic crimes. Steiner shared a story about how, on one recent Holocaust Memorial Day, two boys at her daughter’s school had pretended to “hunt” her daughter as they chased her through the hallways.

“She was … hunted by them?” I asked, wanting to make sure I had heard correctly.

“Yes, she was hunted by them.” Then, in a singsongy voice meant to emulate the melody of a nursery rhyme, she said what the boys had said to her daughter: “My grandfather was Adolf Hitler and he killed your grandfather.”

I put my hands in my pockets and took a deep breath.

“This is everyday Jewish life for children,” she said. “If you raise a Jewish child, how can you avoid this topic?”

Steiner’s question echoed the question that Black parents in the U.S. wrestle with every day. How can we protect our children from the stories of violence that they might find deeply upsetting while also giving them the history to understand who they are in relation to the world that surrounds them? My son is 5 years old; my daughter is 3. I think about what it means to strike that balance all the time.

I mentioned this to Steiner and she nodded, then looked back down at the stones in front of us. “I wonder what it’s like, because when you’re Black in America, at least there are more of you who could connect and support each other. There are so few Jews.”

This point—this difference—had become clear to me in my first few days in Germany. In the United States there are 41 million Black people; we make up 12.5 percent of the population. In Germany, there are approximately 120,000 Jewish people, out of a population of more than 80 million. They represent less than a quarter of 1 percent of the population. More Jewish people live in Boston than in all of Germany. (Today, many Jews in Germany are immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their descendants.) Lots of Germans do not personally know a Jewish person.

This is part of the reason, Steiner believes, that Germany is able to make Holocaust remembrance a prominent part of national life; Jewish people are a historical abstraction more than they are actual people. In the United States, there are still millions of Black people. You cannot simply build

some monuments, lay down some wreaths each year, and apologize for what happened without seeing the manifestation of those past actions in the inequality between Black and white people all around you.

Steiner also believes that the small number of Jewish people who do reside in Germany exist in the collective imagination less as people, and more as empty canvases upon which Germans can paint their repentance. As the scholar James E. Young, the author of *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, writes, “The initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.” The American Jewish writer Dara Horn puts it more bluntly in her book *People Love Dead Jews*, writing that in our contemporary world, most people

> only encountered dead Jews: people whose sole attribute was that they had been murdered, and whose murders served a clear purpose, which was *to teach us something*. Jews were people who, for moral and educational purposes, were supposed to be dead.

Steiner and I continued walking. Before, I had seen stumbling stones only intermittently; now I saw them in front of almost every building. Three here. Six there. Eight here. Twelve there. When we encountered a group of a dozen or more stones, we would stop, look down, and read the names as we had done in front of her old home. I saw dates of birth that read *1938*, *1940*, *1941*. These were children—a 5-year-old, a 4-year-old, a 2-year-old.

A blackbird landed near the brass plates, jabbing its beak into the spaces between the cobblestones with quick, jerking movements. A little girl walked by and pointed in its direction, turning and saying something to her mother as she held her hand.

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, recognized as the official Holocaust memorial of Germany, sits in the center of downtown Berlin, just south of the famous Brandenburg Gate and a block away from the site of the bunker where Hitler died by suicide. Designed by the American Jewish architect Peter Eisenman and spanning 200,000 square feet, it consists of rows of 2,711 concrete blocks that range in height from eight inches to more than 15 feet tall. The space resembles a graveyard, a vast cascade of stone

markers with no names or engravings on their facade. The ground beneath them dips and rises like waves.

The memorial is significant not only for its size and location—the equivalent, in the United States, would be the placement of thousands of stone blocks in Lower Manhattan to honor those subjected to chattel slavery, or on Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., to remember the victims of Indigenous genocide—but also because it was constructed with the political support and full financial backing of the German government.

Were these monuments built for Germans to collectively remember what had been done, or a performance of contrition for the rest of the world?

Steiner told me that, in her opinion, the stumbling stones are a much better means of memorialization than something like the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. "This has more to do with the German society and the expectation of having something big," she said, stretching her hands out again. "We did a big Holocaust, we have a big monument."

Steiner said that whenever she went down to the memorial, she saw people smoking while standing on top of the columns, or jumping back and forth from one to another. "It's lost its purpose and meaning," she said. "Maybe it never got it."

When I visited the memorial, the sky was overcast, its long sweep of endless gray matching the color of the stone columns beneath it. A group of young people took selfies in front of the columns, some throwing up peace signs or puckering their lips as they sat cross-legged on top of a stone. Two women stood in between the shadows, their faces covered in tears, and held each other's hands. A class of students looked up at their teacher as he explained what lay behind him, their eyes moving from him to the columns to one another with a silent solemnity. Three small children played hide-and-seek among the columns, shrieking in delight when they discovered one another. The memorial had become a part of the city's landscape; different people engaged with the space in different ways.



The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is in the center of Berlin, near the Reichstag. (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

I wondered, as I toured the monument, how much of the motivation to create memorials to the Holocaust reflected a desire for Germany to—internally—reckon with its heinous state-sanctioned crimes, and how much of it stemmed from a hope that putting memorials up would demonstrate to the rest of the world that Germany had accounted for its past? Put more directly, were monuments like this one for Germans to collectively remember what had been done? Were they a performance of contrition for the rest of the world? Were they both?

James E. Young writes that "memory is never shaped in a vacuum," and that the reasons for the existence of Holocaust museums and monuments in Germany, and across the world, "are as various as the sites themselves." Some, he argues, were built in response to efforts of Jewish communities to remember, and others were built because of "a government's need to explain a nation's past to itself." The aim of some is to educate the next generation and forge a sense of collective experience, while others are born of guilt. "Still others are intended to attract tourists." The messy truth is that all of these ostensibly disparate motives can find a home in the same project.

At the edge of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, I met up with Deidre Berger, the chair of the executive board of the Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project Foundation and the former director of the American Jewish Committee's Berlin office. She was bundled in an all-black ensemble—jacket, shoes, scarf, and gloves—that matched her short black hair. Berger is American, and Jewish. She has lived in Berlin since 1998.

We discussed the differences in the ways the Holocaust is memorialized in the United States versus in Germany, which she called "enormous." In the United States, she said, the push for Holocaust remembrance has come largely from Holocaust survivors themselves, as well as their descendants.

In Germany, after the war hardly any Jews were left—only 37,000 in the entire country in 1950—and the push to create a national Holocaust memorial came largely from non-Jewish communities, many years later.

The idea "came from within German society," Berger said, but there had been, in previous decades, "perhaps some gentle pushing from other countries that felt that it was important for Germany to have a visible symbol of marking the Holocaust." Notably, the German word for guilt, *schuld*, is the same as the word for debt.

It wasn't always obvious that Germany would build memorials to the Nazis' victims; for decades there was mostly silence. In her book *Learning From the Germans*, the philosopher Susan Neiman writes that families in Germany simply did not discuss the war in the years immediately following it. "Neither side could bear to talk about it," she writes, "one side afraid of facing its own guilt, the other afraid of succumbing to pain and rage."

When 22 of the Third Reich's leaders stood trial in Nuremberg, from November 1945 to October 1946, the four major Allied powers vowed to publicize the proceedings. Officials in the American zone put up billboards and posters with photographs depicting Nazi crimes, had films made that documented the gruesomeness of the concentration camps, and ensured that German newspapers and radio stations reported on the trial. The Allies hoped that the public nature of the trials, and the extensive documentation presented, would help educate Germans about the true scope and horror of what the Nazis had done. According to the military historian Tyler Bamford, in the final month of the tribunal, 71 percent of Germans surveyed by American authorities said that they had learned something new from it.

But awareness did not necessarily translate into reckoning. For some, even those who had supported Hitler, Nuremberg provided the opportunity to wash their hands of culpability, and pin responsibility only on the Nazi leaders on trial. When confronted with the Nazis' atrocities, many Germans repeated the phrase "*Wir konnten nichts tun*"—"We could do nothing." In the years after the trial, former Nazi officials rejoined mainstream society, and many took on positions similar to those they'd held before the war.

Neiman writes that in those postwar years, many Germans saw themselves not as perpetrators, but as victims—as people who had experienced enormous suffering that wasn't being acknowledged by the rest of the world. Husbands, sons, and brothers had died in battle; women and children had spent long, freezing nights in cellars as bombs dropped overhead; civilians

survived on scraps of potato peels. Not only were they being asked to accept having lost the war, but they were being told, amid all their hardship, that they were responsible for evil. The German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich write in their book, *The Inability to Mourn*, that the nation experienced a sort of paralysis, in which people couldn't countenance their soldiers moving so quickly from heroes to victims to perpetrators. If they couldn't even mourn their sons and brothers because the world was telling them they were monsters, how could they bring themselves to mourn the people those soldiers had killed?

"There wasn't really a confrontation until the '60s, when the young generation started asking their parents what they did during the war," Berger told me. They wanted to know what had happened in their community—and their country—and why there was so much silence. Germans, Berger said, many of them the children of those who had witnessed or participated in the Holocaust, began tracing Jewish histories, inviting Jewish families who had fled to come back to visit their towns.

As Berger and I spoke, I wondered about the people leading the various museums, memorials, and other cultural institutions that had resulted from this push in the decades since the '60s. How many of them were Jewish? Did it matter?

I had heard that Germans would sometimes create events, commissions, and institutions centered on commemorating Jewish life without meaningfully consulting any Jewish people. Berger closed her eyes and nodded when I mentioned this, and said that it had been a major issue for years. She told me about how, in 2009 and 2015, the German Parliament had created independent commissions on fighting anti-Semitism. The 2009 commission included only a single Jewish person. The 2015 commission, at first, had no Jewish members at all. Berger found this unacceptable, so she approached officials in the Interior Ministry. She was appalled by the response she got. "They said, 'Well, Jews are not impartial enough, because they're part of the story.'" (Two Jewish members were eventually added to the eight-person committee, bringing its total to 10.) She tucked her lips inside her mouth as if she was preventing herself from saying something she would regret.

I was struck by how much this idea echoed what Black scholars in the United States have navigated for generations. The preeminent early-20th-century Black American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois faced questions from white scholars and funders who doubted his ability to do his work objectively and with the appropriate level of scientific rigor, because they thought he was too invested in the issues he was studying. He was often encouraged to partner with white scholars, who could balance out his ostensible biases.

When I asked Berger what she thought of the Stolpersteine, she told me she feels ambivalent. On the one hand, she said, the project has brought communities together to research their history. But on the other hand, she finds the idea that people are stepping on the names of Jewish people deeply unsettling. “Every time, I cringe,” she said. “They should be plaques on the wall. And why aren’t they? Because most of the owners of buildings wouldn’t accept, even to this day, a plaque saying, ‘Here is where a Jewish family lived.’”

Berger is not alone in this sentiment. In Munich, Charlotte Knobloch, a Holocaust survivor who is the former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, persuaded the city to ban Stolpersteine in 2004. The city eventually created plaques at eye level. “It is my firm belief that we need to do everything we can in order to make sure that remembrance preserves the dignity of the victims,” Knobloch has said. “People murdered in the Holocaust deserve better than a plaque in the dust, street dirt and even worse filth.”

Berger also believes that sometimes the laying of the stones can serve as a sort of penance: After a Stolperstein has been placed, people wipe their hands and believe that they have done all there is to do.

Even though Berger and the American Jewish Committee had, for years, been some of the most prominent advocates for the memorial where we now stood, she also has mixed feelings about how the space turned out. “It’s overwhelming. And the symbolism isn’t entirely clear to me. I mean, we don’t need to have a cemetery,” she said, looking around at the stones. “The whole country is a cemetery.”

But Berger says she is grateful—and relieved—that the space exists.

Eisenman, the architect who designed the memorial, was cognizant of how difficult—perhaps impossible—it would be to create a Holocaust memorial commensurate with the history it carries. “The enormity and horror of the Holocaust are such that any attempt to represent it by traditional means is inevitably inadequate,” he wrote in 2005.

Criticism of the monument has come in many forms. In 2017, a leader of the far-right AfD party said that the monument was a “symbol of national shame”; he didn’t think that shame was a good thing. On the other end of the ideological spectrum, some critics have charged that the memorial isn’t inclusive enough. Demnig, the originator of the Stolperstein project, supports the memorial as a whole, but has been critical of its exclusive focus on Jewish victims. “There were other drafts that would have included all groups of victims that, in my opinion, would have been more effective,” he said in 2013.

The *New Yorker* writer Richard Brody visited the monument in 2012, and took issue with the very framing of the memorial: “The title doesn’t say ‘Holocaust’ or ‘Shoah’; in other words, it doesn’t say anything about who did the murdering or why—there’s nothing along the lines of ‘by Germany under Hitler’s regime,’ and the vagueness is disturbing,” he wrote. “The passive voice of the title—‘murdered Jews’—elides the question that wafts through the exhibit like an odor: murdered by whom?”

I understand some of these criticisms, and still, I couldn’t help but appreciate the scale and scope of the space. I couldn’t help but admire how centrally located it was in the city. There was no missing it. There was no avoiding it. No other nation on Earth has done anything quite like it. Not the United States for its genocide of Indigenous peoples or centuries of enslavement; not France or Britain for their histories of colonial violence; not Japan for its imperial projects across eastern Asia.

Walking through the monument’s columns amid the cacophony of the city all around me felt haunting, but appropriately so. It is a space meant to haunt, meant to overwhelm. But beneath the stones, in the memorial’s underground museum, there was only silence.

I stepped into one of the subterranean exhibits. The room was dark but for illuminated glass panels underfoot. Other visitors moved through the space like shadows, each of us silent, looking down at the glowing glass beneath us. Below each pane were letters, diary entries, and accounts written by people who had been murdered in the Holocaust. I leaned in closer to the panel I was looking at.

There was a note written by a 12-year-old girl named Judith Wishnyatskaya, included as a postscript to a letter her mother had written to her father on July 31, 1942:

> Dear father! I am saying goodbye to you before I die. We would so love to live, but they won’t let us and we will die. I am so scared of this death, because the small children are thrown alive into the pit. Goodbye forever. I kiss you tenderly.
>
> Yours J.

Judith and her mother were killed shortly afterward. Their letter was found by a Soviet soldier near the eastern-Polish town of Baranowicze (in what is now Belarus).

Each panel told the story of another victim, the floor glowing with accounts of murder and terror, a fluorescent extension of the work the stumbling stones were doing throughout the city. There was something about the physical act of looking down, of having your body pause and hover over the names, that made the experience feel somehow intimate.

After reading all of the panels, I took a seat on a bench toward the back of the room. In front of me, and to my left and right, and then behind me, I saw numbers with the names of different European countries alongside them. I quickly realized that these numbers reflected estimates of how many Jews from each nation had been killed in the Holocaust.

> Belgium 25,000–25,700
> Hungary 270,000–300,000
> Greece 58,900–59,200
> Latvia 65,000–70,000

Italy 7,600–8,500
Lithuania 140,000–150,000
Germany 160,000–165,000
Poland 2,900,000–3,100,000

I stopped at this last number and caught my breath. I hadn't known that half of the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust were Polish. (Ninety percent of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland were murdered, I would later learn.) By the end of the war, only 380,000 Polish Jews survived.

In school, I read more books about the Holocaust than perhaps any other atrocity in human history, including those that took place on American soil. I have watched countless films and documentaries on World War II and the Holocaust. But it wasn't until this moment, surrounded by these numbers that stretched around the room and the stories that glowed underfoot, that I began to fully feel the scale of this atrocity.

Approximately two-thirds of all the Jews in Europe were killed in the span of just a few years, a level of slaughter that is overwhelming to consider. Something about being there—in Berlin, in this museum, in this room—made it all feel so much more real.

The next day I met Lea Rosh at a small café in the Güntzelkiez neighborhood of Berlin. Rosh, who is not Jewish, is a former television journalist, and was among the first women to manage a public broadcasting service in Germany. Along with the historian Eberhard Jäckel (who was not Jewish either), she spent nearly 20 years pushing for Germany to build a memorial to the Holocaust. Their unrelenting advocacy is widely understood as one of the primary reasons the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe exists at all.

Rosh was 85 years old when we met. She is not quite fluent in English, and I don't speak German, so we each spoke slowly, attempting not to miss each other's words. She was accompanied by a man named Olaf, and we discussed her work to bring the memorial to fruition in between bites of cake and fruit.

Rosh said that in the mid-1980s she and Jäckel had begun collaborating on a four-part television documentary about the Holocaust. Jäckel, one of Germany's leading historians of Nazism, told her that Germany needed to build a monument to the Jews killed in the Holocaust. Not just the German Jews, but the Jews from all across Europe. "The German victims were 2 percent of the whole," she told me. Her conversations with Jäckel, and the experience of working on the series, were transformative for Rosh.



Lea Rosh, who helped push Germany to build a national memorial to the Holocaust. In 2021, a portrait of Rosh by Frédéric Brenner was featured in an exhibition of the photographer's work at the Jewish Museum Berlin. (Jule Roehr)

In 1989, Rosh and Jäckel published a formal call to organize German citizens to help erect a memorial. "I was sure we'd have it in three years, because it's so clear to do it," she said as she set her fork down. "It was not clear for this country."

So this became her mission, to make the moral imperative for building a memorial undeniably, inescapably clear. She began a public crusade to

pressure the German government, she told me, speaking about the need for a memorial on her television show, and her group took out ads in newspapers and met with political and civic leaders. She said that every Saturday for about eight years, she stood on the street with other advocates, collecting signatures in support of a museum. “If it’s raining? Okay. It snowed? Okay. Sunshine? Okay. We stood there.”

Rosh said that young people were the most supportive of her efforts. I asked her why that was. Then Olaf raised his eyebrows and said, “The old ones were soldiers in the war.”

“People did not want to show we were guilty,” Rosh said. “But the Holocaust memorial shows …” Olaf completed her thought: “Yes, we were guilty.”

Despite the resistance, Rosh and others pressed ahead. Then, in 1999, a decade after she began advocating for it and more than five decades after the event itself, the German Parliament approved the construction of a national Holocaust memorial. It would take another six years to build.

Her work, however, has not been without controversy. Barbara Steiner had told me about how, when Rosh gave a speech at the memorial’s opening, she held up a tooth—“a tooth that she found on the ground of a concentration camp.” Rosh announced that she planned to have the tooth embedded in the memorial. “Everybody was shocked,” Steiner told me. “You don’t take something of a murdered person with you.” Steiner shook her head, exasperated. (The tooth was not ultimately added to the memorial.)

As I walked through the streets of Berlin, past the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, past the Jewish Museum, past Gleis 17, past Hitler’s bunker, and past the Stolpersteine that are scattered across the streets of the city like stars, I had the feeling of being confronted with the past at every moment. I wondered if I would feel different if I encountered these every day. Would the gleam of the stumbling stones eventually dim and fade into the rest of the pavement? Would the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe become a silhouette in the corner of my eye as I sped by in a taxi?

“I think there’s a real risk of all these manifestations becoming either senseless or unreadable, or just part of the city landscape at some point,” the German historian Daniel Schönpflug told me. “It creates the feeling that we’re doing so well at this, we’re world champion of Holocaust memory, and this gives us also legitimacy,” he said. “This memory loses its pain, once it’s put into an almost positive, proud context.”

Was Rosh happy with how the memorial and the museum had turned out? I asked. Did she think that it did justice to the victims?

“It’s 6 million murdered people. You cannot be happy,” she said, her voice becoming low. “You can [only] be satisfied that it was possible to build them a memorial.”

I asked Rosh if she thinks that Germany has done enough to account for its past, or if she thinks there is still more to do. She paused and looked up, her eyes searching the ceiling. “Difficult to say, because our memorial is a big memorial. It’s the biggest. There’s no example in the world for such a thing,” she said. She told me that memorials and monuments had been constructed to essentially every group of victims, and that Germany had come a long way since she first began her advocacy, almost 35 years ago.

“I think you cannot do more. What else?”

The memory of Jewish life in Berlin is not singularly tied to the spectacle of mass death. There is a museum that attempts to ensure that German Jews are remembered as a people with a rich culture, and not only remembered for what was done to them. At a café in Berlin’s Schöneberg neighborhood, I met with Cilly Kugelmann, who was a co-founder and, until her retirement in 2020, the program director of the Jewish Museum Berlin.

Kugelmann compared that institution to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in the sense that both attempt to tell the story of an oppressed group, without the entirety of their cultural identities being linked to that oppression. Jewish history, Kugelmann said, does not begin and end with the Holocaust.

I was curious what she made of the other memorials and museums across Berlin. “Well, I think one has to ask yourself, what would Germany be without these memorials? You can criticize every single memorial. It’s an aesthetic expression and it never comes close to what really happened, so it’s always ambiguous. But on the other hand, what would we say if it wouldn’t be there at all? It’s a dilemma. It’s an unsolvable dilemma.”

Both of Kugelmann’s parents were Jews from Poland. They were married before the war and had two children. In 1943 they were all sent to Auschwitz. Her parents survived, but their first set of children—siblings Kugelmann never knew—were killed.




Cilly Kugelmann, who retired in 2020 as the program director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, in the museum’s
“Memory Void,” which includes an installation called *Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves)*, by the Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman. Visitors are allowed to walk on the more than 10,000 open-mouthed iron faces that cover the floor. (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

Her parents didn't talk much, or really at all, about their time in the concentration camps. But Kugelmann told me that once, she was watching a film about the liberation of the camps, and as the camera was scanning across survivors, she saw her father's face.

After the war ended and her parents were liberated, they moved to Frankfurt am Main, where they started a new family. As a child, Kugelmann was aware that she had a pair of siblings who "were no longer there," but she did not have a full sense of what that meant. Had they died? Were they living somewhere else? Would she ever meet them? Her mother wore a silver medallion around her neck with photos of the two children, but she never spoke of them.

It was only many years later that Kugelmann was able to put the pieces together. From the work of the Polish Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski and others, she learned about the ghetto from which her family had been deported. She learned that all the infants and smaller children from this ghetto, including her siblings, would have been killed immediately upon their arrival at Auschwitz. Even when she discovered this information, she never brought it up with her parents.

I asked Kugelmann why not. Kugelmann placed her tea down and traced her fingers along the edge of the saucer. "You have a sense of what you can ask a parent and what you can't ask a parent. If I try to explain it to people, I refer to rape. The most humiliating thing that can happen. And the question is: Would you be able to question your mother about details of the rape? Of course you would not."

"And for you that feels analogous?" I asked.

"Yes, absolutely."

The House of the Wannsee Conference is a villa about half an hour from the center of Berlin, on a narrow, one-way street just off Wannsee Lake.

Everything about the villa is idyllic. Behind the mansion, a small band of brown ducks dipped their heads into the lake and then returned to the surface, their wet feathers gleaming under the midday sun. Sailboats swept

across the water while gentle waves lapped against a stone wall on the shore. Wind chimes on a nearby tree sang a chorus in the light breeze.

This was where, on January 20, 1942, the leaders of the Nazi regime discussed and drafted their ideas about how to implement "the final solution of the Jewish question."

Exactly 50 years later, the villa was reopened as a museum. But unlike most of the other sites I visited in Berlin, it was not created to remember the victims of the Holocaust so much as the perpetrators.



The House of the Wannsee Conference, where in 1942 Nazi leaders planned the annihilation of European Jews (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

Because it's outside the city center, the museum is not the sort of place people just happen to stumble upon. If you end up there, you intended to. As I walked through one of the museum's long hallways, I saw a row of 15 yellowed pages in a glass case: a copy of the Wannsee Conference's minutes, which in thinly veiled language laid out the plan for the mass murder of European Jews.

As the legal scholar James Q. Whitman has documented, when Nazi officials first formulated their Nuremberg race laws, in 1934, they drew inspiration from the U.S., modeling them in part on the Jim Crow laws. The Nazis looked to America's history of oppression in other ways, too. As Susan Neiman writes, "Hitler took American westward expansion, with its destruction of Native peoples, as the template for the eastward expansion he said was needed to provide Germans with *Lebensraum*—room to live."

Toward the top of the Wannsee meeting notes, the leaders outlined how, in the preceding years, the policy had been to facilitate the emigration of Jews from Germany. After emigration was deemed infeasible because of the war, the Nazis changed course and began forcibly expelling Jews from Germany, to the east. "This operation should be regarded only as a provisional option," they wrote, "but it is already supplying practical experience of great significance in view of the coming final solution of the Jewish question."

"The Jewish question" needed to be resolved not only in Germany, but throughout all of Europe. The "evacuated" Jews, the Nazis decided, should be put to work, "during which a large proportion will no doubt drop out through natural reduction."

Upstairs, I met with Deborah Hartmann, the museum's director. She sat across from me in her office, her brown hair falling over one shoulder. Behind her, through floor-to-ceiling windows that opened onto a veranda, the lake glimmered. Born in Austria, Hartmann had worked earlier in her career as a guide at the Jewish Museum Vienna, and then at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial. After nearly 15 years there, she'd applied for the opening at Wannsee.

Walking around the museum, I had felt the presence of the men who had choreographed a genocide, and sometimes wondered whether lifting up the names and ideas of people who had engaged in mass murder could have unintended consequences. Might someone come to a museum like this and be inspired by what they saw? Was there a risk in providing these men with a posthumous platform? I asked Hartmann why she felt it was so important to have a museum that included the thoughts and stories of the perpetrators.

“We cannot only focus on the Jewish perspective and on the perspective of those who perished. We have to learn something about anti-Semitism, about the views of national socialism,” she said. “Also, about the bystanders … This could be the neighbor who was not a member of the Nazi Party but was just hanging around, had a nice view out of the window seeing the neighbors being deported.” A bird flew by the window, rested on the veranda, looked around, then took off again over the lake. “We need to focus on all of them to be able to understand the picture of what was going on.”

Part of what Hartmann wants visitors to understand is that the people who committed these atrocities were, in many ways, just like anyone else. It can be easy, she said, to turn them into two-dimensional caricatures of evil—and in some ways they were. But they also had wives, children, parents, friends. As Hartmann put it, “People who participated in the mass shootings in the morning wrote nice letters to their families back home in the afternoon.”

The museum has hosted visitors from all over the world, some of whom are descendants of the perpetrators. Just a few months earlier, Hartmann told me, she’d been flipping through the museum’s guest book and saw that one of the visitors who’d left a note was the granddaughter of Martin Luther, one of the 15 Nazi officials present at the Wannsee Conference. It was Luther’s copy of the minutes that American troops discovered in 1945. “She wrote down in the guest book, ‘I’m very much ashamed of what my grandfather was doing.’”

I was floored by this revelation. I tried to imagine what it must have been like for this woman to walk through the hallways of the place where her own grandfather had helped orchestrate the slaughter of millions of people. What emotions could she possibly have felt? Beyond the shame she said she experienced, I wonder, too, if there was a sense of culpability. Certainly, she is not responsible for what her grandfather did. But what must it feel like to be part of such a lineage? How does one extract oneself from that legacy?

Hartmann has a master’s degree in political science; she titled her thesis “Europe and the Shoah: Universal Remembrance and Particular Memories.” But her proximity to this subject matter is not just academic. Hartmann is Jewish, and her great-grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust. When

she first started working at the museum, she didn't like to be alone in the building.

The previous director of the museum was not Jewish, and Hartmann wonders whether it would have been possible 20 years ago for a Jewish person to be the head of such a museum in Germany—or whether they would have even wanted to. Now, though, she said that Jewish people are much more a part of the public conversation about the institutions of memory that depict their experience. They are stepping into leadership positions that they previously would not have been considered for.

Hartmann makes a point of emphasizing that she doesn't think non-Jews should be prevented from leading these museums. On the contrary, she believes that Jews and non-Jews should always be working in collaboration. Still, she can't help but think about those who, for generations, were kept from being part of the project of Holocaust memorialization because they were deemed too close to the subject matter.

Hartmann told me about a Jewish historian named Joseph Wulf, a survivor of Auschwitz who wrote books on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. For years, beginning in 1965, Wulf advocated for the West German government to make the Wannsee house into a Holocaust research center, but his proposal was ignored. On October 10, 1974, Wulf died by suicide after jumping from the window of his Berlin apartment. In a letter to his son a few months before his death he wrote, "I have published 18 books about the Third Reich and they have had no effect. You can document everything to death for the Germans … Yet the mass murderers walk around free, live in their little houses, and grow flowers."

"He was never accepted by German historians, because they had the feeling that he cannot be objective as a Jewish survivor," Hartmann said, echoing a point that Deidre Berger had made. Hartmann always found the idea that Jewish scholars couldn't be "objective" because of their "proximity" to the Holocaust ironic, given that many non-Jewish scholars who ended up writing the history of the Holocaust had their own proximity to the event. "On the German side, those historians? We know who they were," she said. "The Hitler Youth."

In central Berlin stands another museum dedicated to telling the story of the Holocaust's perpetrators. At the Topography of Terror museum, people can learn about the history of the Nazi regime, the way Hitler and his followers gained power, and the way they exerted that power to devastating effect. It is located on the former grounds of the headquarters of the Gestapo, the high command and security service of the SS, and the Reich Security Main Office.

I met Jennifer Neal, a journalist and an author, on the museum's steps. Neal is Black, and originally from Chicago. She has lived in Berlin since 2016.



The author and journalist Jennifer Neal says Germany has made some admirable efforts to reckon with its Holocaust history, but has been less willing to account for other crimes. (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

Neal told me that, in some ways, Germany has done an admirable job of reckoning with its history. For example, the government has paid reparations through a program called Wiedergutmachung, which translates roughly to "making good again." In 1952, West Germany agreed to pay Israel 3 billion German marks over time, which played a crucial role in ensuring the young nation's economic stability. It also provided funds for individual payments, which continue to this day. As of 2020, Germany had paid out more than $90 billion. (The process of applying for individual reparations, however, was difficult and traumatic for many survivors, Neiman writes in *Learning From the Germans*. Those who survived Auschwitz, for example, had to outline how and when they'd arrived at the camp; obtain two sworn statements from witnesses who could confirm that they'd really been there; submit the number that had been tattooed on their skin; provide evidence of any injuries they'd suffered at the camp; and also prove that they had a low income.)

Neal is flummoxed by the notion that taking down Confederate statues would somehow be "erasing history."

Neal said that Germans haven't always been as willing to account for the country's other crimes. From 1904 to 1908, the German military committed genocide against Indigenous communities in present-day Namibia, which at the time was a colony known as German South West Africa. An estimated 80,000 people were exterminated through forced labor, starvation, and disease in concentration camps there. Eighty percent of the Herero people and 50 percent of the Nama people are thought to have been killed.

The Namibian genocide is considered the first genocide of the 20th century. Many historians contend that the racialized hierarchy used to justify killing Namibians and conducting phrenological studies on them—noting the shape and size of their skulls—was a direct prelude to the Holocaust. Dr. Eugen Fischer, who conducted eugenics experiments on living Namibian people, went on to teach his racial theories to doctors in the Nazi regime. One of the

students influenced by Fischer's work was Josef Mengele, who led heinous experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz.

The Namibian government spent years demanding that Germany both apologize and pay reparations for what happened, and after years of resistance to the idea, in May 2021 the German government officially recognized the killings as genocide and issued an apology. Germany offered to fund $1.3 billion worth of projects in Namibia over 30 years, an amount many Namibians felt was far too low. Herero Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro said the deal was "an insult" because it did not include the payment of individual reparations.

Neal told me that watching the conversation in the U.S. about whether Confederate statues should come down seems especially ludicrous from her vantage point in Europe. She's flummoxed by the notion that taking down the statues would somehow be "erasing history."

"What Germany does well in regards to the Holocaust is show that when you honor the victims instead of the perpetrators, you're still remembering history," she said. "But you're making it clear who the aggressors were, who the victims were, and who we honored. I think this is important in terms of how the country heals." She shook her head. "That is why I think the United States is very far from healing."





The Topography of Terror museum stands on the former grounds of the Gestapo headquarters and tells the story of the Holocaust's perpetrators. (Marc Wilson for *The Atlantic*)

In early October of this year, I visited Dachau. To enter the concentration camp—now a memorial site—visitors must walk across a small concrete bridge and through the gates of the Jourhaus, a cream-colored building topped with a watchtower that juts up from the roof like a steeple. Inscribed on the black iron gates is the phrase Arbeit Macht Frei, "Work Sets You Free." The slogan, Nazi propaganda meant to present the camps as innocuous places of "work" or "reeducation," appeared at the gates of concentration camps across Europe.

Gravel crunched beneath the feet of visitors walking between exhibitions; the sea of small gray pebbles was interrupted only by the brown and yellow leaves that had been scattered by the wind.

Dachau's history, in part, reflects the different ways that East and West Germany remembered the Holocaust in the postwar years. Former concentration camps in Soviet-controlled territory in the east—such as Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, and Sachsenhausen—were turned into memorials soon after the war, with restoration funds coming from both the state and individual donations. Dachau, located in the Allied-controlled western territory, did not receive any public funding until 1965, when a group of former prisoners persuaded the state of Bavaria to help finance a memorial there. Not until after the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990 did any memorial sites at West German camps receive federal funding.

When Dachau was built, in 1938, it was designed to hold 6,000 prisoners. But by April 29, 1945, when American forces liberated the camp, it held about 32,000. Barracks built to house 200 people held as many as 2,000. The originals were demolished in the 1960s, but as I walked through the reconstructed barracks I tried to imagine so many people living in them at once: The women pushed against one another between the splintered, wooden bed frames. The diseases that swept over men's bodies and turned them into silence. My breathing quickened. My stomach churned.



The author in the “Garden of Exile” at the Jewish Museum Berlin (Frédéric Brenner)

Visiting the memorial site, I was struck by how close it was to the homes, restaurants, and cafés around it. This was not a concentration camp in the middle of nowhere. *Surely*, I thought, *those who lived nearby during the war knew what was happening there*.

George Tievsky, an American medic who helped liberate Dachau, had a similar reaction. "I could smell the stench from the camp," he said of walking through the town on a Sunday in May 1945.

> And I said to myself how can this be? How can this be? How could this exist here? These people. This town. Beside this death camp? These people knew what was in the camp. They heard the trains coming with people, and the trains go out empty. They smelled the smell of death. They saw the smoke from the chimneys … and yet when I asked them … did you know about this? … They all denied it. They all denied knowledge of it. There was no guilt. There was no remorse.

I wondered if this was before or after the American soldiers brought Germans to see the camp, before they entered the gates and saw the emaciated bodies, smelled the rotting flesh. Before local Germans were made to bury the bodies. Did they still deny it then?

At the far end of the camp stands "Barrack X," a crematorium that served as both an SS killing facility and a place to dispose of the dead. To walk through the building is to walk in the shadow of mechanized slaughter.

I have stood in many places that carry a history of death—plantations, execution chambers—but I have never felt my chest get tight the way it did when I stood inside the building's gas chamber. The ceiling was so low, you could reach up and touch it with your hands. It had more than a dozen holes designed to release poison gas.

There were four other visitors in the chamber with me. Our hands were in our pockets; we were silent. Occasionally, we would catch eyes, affirming, if only for a moment, that we each understood the solemnity of the space we were in.

I imagined the people who once stood in rooms like this one in death camps across Europe, the moment they realized what the holes in the ceiling were for. It is a fear I cannot fathom. It is a type of torture I cannot fully grasp.

Historians do not believe that the gas chamber in Dachau, which was fully operational, was ever used for mass killings, though it is unclear why not (one witness account claims that some people were killed by poison gas there in 1944). Still, the building was a site of murders by other means—primarily shootings and hangings.

In the room at the center of the building were four red-brick ovens, each equipped with a slab used to insert bodies into the furnace. Wooden beams crisscrossed the ceiling; a panel explained that most of the hangings done in the camp were done from these beams. After having been suffocated, the bodies were cut down and placed directly into the ovens.

Outside, I looked at the building's chimney and imagined the sight of smoke rising from it—smoke filled with stories, smoke filled with families, smoke filled with futures that had been erased.

I turned to my right and walked down a path that led me through a canopy of trees. I arrived at a square patch of land with a stone cross at its center. Fosse Commune Grab Vieler Tausend Unbekannter. "Grave of Many Thousands Unknown." This was a grave where the ashes of bodies burned in the crematorium had been buried. This was an effort to remember.

I left the camp and stepped out onto the street. A woman was pushing a baby in a stroller, a man rode his bicycle and rang its bell as he passed neighbors on the street, two friends held hands as they laughed and chatted underneath the afternoon sun.

In 1949, W. E. B. Du Bois visited Warsaw, where he witnessed firsthand the aftermath of Nazi destruction. "I have seen something of human upheaval in this world," he said. "The scream and shots of a race riot in Atlanta; the marching of the Ku Klux Klan; the threat of courts and police; the neglect and destruction of human habitation; but nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw."

Du Bois said that the experience "helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination, and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph and broaden in the world."

Americans do not have to, and should not, wait for the government to find its conscience. Ordinary people are the conscience.

As Du Bois stood amid the rubble of what was once the Warsaw Ghetto, he looked around. "There was complete and total waste, and a monument," he said. He was referring to the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, which commemorates those who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943. It was the largest uprising of Jewish people during World War II; approximately 7,000 Jews were killed. That monument helped him see the Jews not simply as victims, but as people who rebelled, much like Black people in the United States had rebelled against slavery and Jim Crow.

After spending time in Germany, I, too, gained a sense of clarity about the interconnectedness of racial oppression and state violence. I left with a clearer understanding of the implications of how those periods of history are remembered, or not.

I was reminded, too, that many of Germany's most powerful memorials did not begin as state-sanctioned projects, but emerged—and are still emerging—from ordinary people outside the government who pushed the country to be honest about its past. Sometimes that means putting down Stolpersteine. Sometimes that means standing on the street for years collecting signatures for the massive memorial to murdered Jews that you believe the country needs. Americans do not have to, and should not, wait for the government to find its conscience. Ordinary people are the conscience.

Some in the U.S. have undertaken efforts reminiscent of those in Germany. In Connecticut, a group of educators started the Witness Stones Project, modeled after the Stolpersteine in Germany. The group works with schoolchildren in five Northeast states to help them more intimately understand the history of slavery in their town. In Camden, New Jersey, a local historical society has erected markers in places where enslaved people were sold, echoing the memorials to deported Jews at train stations in

Germany. In Montgomery, Alabama, the civil-rights attorney Bryan Stevenson, who often cites Germany in his work, has built the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which commemorates the history of slavery and the oppression of Black Americans. The space has a similar physical and emotional texture to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

None of these projects, whether in the U.S. or Germany, can ever be commensurate with the history they are tasked with remembering. It is impossible for any memorial to slavery to capture its full horror, or for any memorial to the Holocaust to express the full humanity of the victims. No stone in the ground can make up for a life. No museum can bring back millions of people. It cannot be done, and yet we must try to honor those lives, and to account for this history, as best we can. It is the very act of attempting to remember that becomes the most powerful memorial of all.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline "Monuments to the Unthinkable." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/holocaust-remembrance-lessons-america/671893/

Features

- Taiwan Prepares to Be Invaded
- The Too-Muchness of Bono
- How Much Would You Pay to Save Your Cat’s Life?
- How Taylor Sheridan Created America’s Most Popular TV Show
- Where My Characters Come From

Taiwan Prepares to Be Invaded

If China wants to do something drastic, President Tsai Ing-wen told me, “Xi has to weigh the costs. He has to think twice.”

by Ben Rhodes



Taiwan’s presidential offices are located in a sprawling, stately complex built by the Japanese colonial administration in the early 20th century—a reminder that, for all the belligerent rhetoric coming from the Chinese Communist Party, Taiwan has not been firmly under Beijing’s control for

well over 100 years. When I arrived at the offices in September for an interview with President Tsai Ing-wen, it occurred to me that the large tower rising above the entrance might become a target in the event of an invasion.

Now in her sixth year in power, Tsai is Taiwan's first female president. We met in a cavernous room decorated with orchids and a grandfather clock. When she entered, she was trailed by a retinue of aides—mostly men. Tsai was brisk, friendly, and businesslike. There was little small talk as we sat across from each other in armchairs. Tsai projected a reserved assurance. I told her that I wanted to know what it was like to face a mounting threat, particularly after the brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russian President Vladimir Putin—Chinese President Xi Jinping's self-proclaimed "best friend" on the world stage. Tsai or some future Taiwanese leader could soon have the dubious distinction of playing the role of Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky to Xi's Putin.

"It's real that this thing could happen to us," Tsai said. "So we need to get ourselves ready." At another point, she emphasized: "There is a genuine threat out there. It's not hype."

Fate has placed Taiwan and Ukraine in similar positions. Both have giant neighbors who once ruled them as imperial possessions. Both have undergone democratic transformations and have thus become an ideological danger to the autocrats who covet their territory. Just as Putin has made the erasure of Ukraine's sovereignty central to his political project, Xi has vowed to unify China and Taiwan, by force if necessary. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned in October that China may be working on a "much faster timeline" for dealing—somehow—with Taiwan. U.S. military and intelligence leaders have pointed to 2027 as a potential time frame for an invasion, believing that China's military modernization will have advanced sufficiently by then.

The situation requires Tsai to perform a careful balancing act: preparing for war while seeking to avoid it.

Tsai is the youngest of 11 children born to the owner of an auto-repair store. She speaks English with a faint trace of a British accent—she did postgraduate work at the London School of Economics. Tsai chooses her

words carefully and appears at peace with the role that history has assigned her. She is well aware of the stakes. Taiwan's 24 million people have developed their own distinctive and open culture, their own democratic institutions. Her position toward China and the People's Liberation Army is defiant: She made clear to me that the Taiwanese will not be bullied, and that Beijing should not misjudge their resolve. "If the PLA wants to do something drastic, Xi has to weigh the costs," Tsai said. "He has to think twice."

Read: How China wants to replace the U.S. order

Of course, a war with China would be enormously lopsided. Tsai noted that the Taiwan legislature recently passed a double-digit increase in the defense budget; Taiwan is now on pace to spend more than $19 billion on defense in 2023. But China spends more than $200 billion a year. This has prompted calls for a shift in Taiwan's defense priorities. Instead of building large, conventional hardware (airplanes, tanks, submarines), military experts have urged Taiwan to focus on so-called asymmetric capabilities (anti-ship weapons, surface-to-air missiles, stockpiles of small arms and ammunition), which have served Ukraine well in repelling a larger invader. That, combined with a bigger force of civilian reserves, could make the cost of an invasion too high for China. This approach has earned a nickname in global defense circles: "the porcupine strategy."

From Tsai's perspective, it is important to remain low-key and unrattled, but also to build up the capacity for Taiwan to defend itself. During China's particularly aggressive military exercises in August—mounted in response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island—Tsai maintained what appeared to be a normal schedule, attending a cultural festival but also visiting with troops. She described to me a resilient calm among younger people. They want to get trained, she said. "They're not trying to escape."

If war comes, a thriving democracy could be extinguished. The United States could be drawn into its first direct military conflict with a nuclear-armed superpower.

China's threatening behavior, meanwhile, has only escalated. Chinese officials have repeatedly expressed the view that the entirety of the Taiwan

Strait already belongs to China. Chinese warplanes regularly violate Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone. During the military exercises conducted after Pelosi's visit, China shot missiles over Taiwan and encircled it with warships in a maneuver that hinted at a future blockade—no small concern for an island that imports nearly all of its energy.

War is never inevitable, but if it comes, it would have world-changing consequences. A thriving democracy could be extinguished. The Chinese Communist Party could be either emboldened or destabilized. Given Taiwan's dominance of the semiconductor industry and the disruption of U.S.-China trade, the global economy could suffer a shock far greater than the one caused by the war in Ukraine. And the United States could be drawn into its first direct military conflict with a nuclear-armed superpower.

Taiwan's formal status has been unresolved for decades. Neither independent nor part of the People's Republic of China, the citizens of Taiwan have lived within a tenuous status quo constructed by diplomats. Essentially, the arrangement has worked like this: Taiwan doesn't declare independence, China doesn't invade, and the U.S. doesn't say definitively whether it would enter a conflict should one occur.

The type of support that Taiwan now needs—to deter a conflict or to defend itself if conflict comes—is a subject of growing debate in Taipei and Washington. The last time there was a military crisis in the Taiwan Strait was in 1995, ahead of Taiwan's first democratic presidential election. China test-fired ballistic missiles and conducted rehearsals for an amphibious invasion. The U.S. countered by sending an aircraft-carrier group and other naval assets to the region, demonstrating its overwhelming military advantage. Things have changed since then. China now has the world's largest navy, with more than 350 ships and submarines. Its rocket force maintains the world's largest arsenal of land-based missiles, which would feature in any war with Taiwan.

Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, who was chief of Taiwan's General Staff from 2017 to 2019, has championed the shift to asymmetric capabilities and has emerged as a Cassandra-like figure in his warnings that Taiwan is not preparing fast enough. His rigid military manner is animated by a blunt sense of urgency. Like officials I spoke with who are still in government,

Lee saw the Chinese response to the Pelosi visit as another step in Beijing's pursuit of a "new normal." On more than one occasion China has pushed beyond the median line in the waters between Taiwan and China. Its flights into Taiwan's air-defense zone have escalated. China is eating away at Taiwan's sovereignty, de facto claiming its airspace and waters. Several analysts have used the phrase *boiling the frog* to describe Beijing's Taiwan strategy.

Read: China's mistakes can be America's gain

This new normal presents challenges to both Taiwan and the United States. China's conventional firepower could overwhelm Taiwan's air and naval defenses—its capacity to keep the enemy at a distance. China could also move quickly to deny the U.S. access to the island, cutting it off from the outside world by sea and air. Politically, Lee said, the message from China to the U.S. and Taiwan is simple: "I can do whatever I want in Taiwan, and there's nothing the U.S. can do about it." This message came across unequivocally in a white paper that Beijing released in August. The Cliffs Notes version of this lengthy document can be surmised from the first three section headings: "I. Taiwan Is Part of China—This Is an Indisputable Fact," "II. Resolute Efforts of the CPC to Realize China's Complete Reunification," and "III. China's Complete Reunification Is a Process That Cannot Be Halted."

Lee points to two possible scenarios. The first is a coercive approach in which China encircles and pressures Taiwan—perhaps even seizing outlying islands and engaging in missile strikes. The second is a full-scale invasion. Given that China would likely suffer the same international consequences for conducting a war of attrition as it would for mounting an outright invasion, Lee worries that Beijing might decide the invasion scenario makes more sense. Lee has grown frustrated by Taiwan's continued procurement of large weapons systems, such as airplanes and ships. He argues that it is not worth trying to keep up with China's conventional superiority. To take just one example: In the event of a war, Chinese missiles could destroy Taiwan's runways, rendering expensive fighter jets useless.

"The purpose is to make China believe that if you want to invade Taiwan, you will suffer huge losses," said Admiral Lee Hsi-ming. "And if you still

invade Taiwan, you will not be able to succeed."

You may not be able to stop an invasion, Lee says, but you *can* stop China from subjugating Taiwan. This entails denying China the ability to control the battle space. The Chinese haven't fought a war in several decades, and Taiwan has geographic advantages—including ample mountains and few beaches suitable for amphibious operations. Anti-ship missiles, anti-tank weapons, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, drones, long-range artillery, and small arms could wreak havoc on an invading force, and disrupt the supply chains necessary to sustain an occupation. Lee also argues that Taiwan's civilian population should be organized into a trained Territorial Defense Force, so that any attempted occupation would be met by the broadest possible resistance. "As long as China fails, Taiwan wins the war," Lee explained.

Ben Rhodes: We have reached a hinge of history

The utility of this approach has become clearer after Russia's calamitous "special military operation" in Ukraine. "The purpose is to make China believe that if you want to invade Taiwan, you will suffer huge losses," Lee said. "And if you still invade Taiwan, you will not be able to succeed." This will require a continued shift in Taiwan's own defense doctrine. That shift has been encouraged by the Biden administration and was evident in September's $1.1 billion U.S. arms sale to Taiwan, which included a substantial number of anti-ship Harpoon missiles and Sidewinder surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles. But as Lee sees it, the pace must quicken. "Taiwan needs a strategic paradigm shift," he told me.

In her own deliberate and incremental fashion, Tsai has directed some defense spending in this direction and expressed support for training civilians in nonmilitary skills such as "community defense, first aid, and information awareness." Given that Taiwan's largest destination for trade and investment is China, Tsai is also working to diversify Taiwan's economy to make it less reliant on that market, launching new trade talks with the United States and pursuing trade and investment in Southeast Asia. She has created a Ministry of Digital Affairs and bolstered cyberdefenses to respond to constant Chinese hacking and disinformation campaigns. As a pointed reminder, she speaks openly about the island's dominance in advanced

semiconductors—Taiwan manufactures 90 percent of them—which she calls a “silicon shield.” A war that curbed supply could prove highly disruptive for Beijing—perhaps too disruptive. Tsai’s foreign policy has also courted other democracies, seeking friends with similar values.

How did we get to this point? The origin story of Taiwan most familiar to Americans begins in 1949, when Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist forces, locked for years in a civil war with Mao Zedong’s Communists, were defeated. Along with much of his remaining army, Chiang fled to Taiwan and set up a government-in-exile called the Republic of China. That government was recognized by the United States. But within a few years of Richard Nixon’s 1972 Cold War opening to Beijing, the U.S. formally switched diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic. Ever since, Taiwan’s status has been cloaked in ambiguity. The U.S. acknowledges Beijing’s claim to Taiwan without recognizing its sovereignty over the island. To help deter a Chinese effort to seize Taiwan by force, the U.S. has pledged to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself.

From the January 1980 issue: Taiwan, an unmarried country

That origin story explains Taiwan’s curious geopolitical status, but it leaves a lot out. When Chiang fled to Taiwan—with roughly 2 million Chinese from the mainland—there were some 6 million people already living on an island that was just emerging from 50 years of Japanese rule. Most of the people living on the island when Chiang arrived could claim roots in Taiwan going back hundreds of years. They had their own languages and culture. So too did the island’s many Indigenous groups, such as the Amis, the Atayal, and the Paiwan. To subjugate the island, Chiang killed and imprisoned tens of thousands over decades—a period known as the White Terror. He set up a military dictatorship under the leadership of his Chinese nationalist Kuomintang Party (KMT) and, from this offshore platform, vowed to reclaim mainland China.



Taiwan is different now. With its broad boulevards, glass towers, military monuments, narrow side streets, night markets, and ample signs in English, Taipei today presents an ambience of blended cultures: Chinese, Japanese, Western, and distinctly Taiwanese. Bubble tea, a Taiwanese invention, is everywhere. But consider what it was like to grow up in the shadow of Taiwan's postwar history, and you can better understand the profound ways in which younger generations have been remaking the island's politics and identity.

Emily Y. Wu is a professional podcaster who blends a focus on youth culture with an urgent concern for Taiwan's political present. (One of her shows is called *Metalhead Politics*.) She is among dozens of Taiwanese I spoke with during the past year, first on Zoom, then in person in Taipei. Wu was born under KMT martial law in 1984. Her family did not come over with Chiang; they had lived in Taiwan for generations. "Chiang Kai-shek brought China over," she told me. "I grew up always knowing that there was this alternate history: It was Taiwanese history, which was not taught in school." Students were taught Chinese history and geography under the presumption that the KMT would one day govern China again. Mandarin was spoken in class,

and speaking Taiwanese was discouraged. Wu recalled Lesson 9 of her childhood textbook: "'Hello teachers, hello students, we are Chinese!'"

But a movement for democracy was building. "We grew up hearing these names, knowing that there was a group of activists, scholars, lawyers that tried to imagine a free Taiwan," Wu explained. Many of those people were members of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which currently governs Taiwan. In 1987, the KMT lifted nearly 40 years of martial law. Wu's political consciousness was shaped by the protests, marches, and hunger strikes that led to Taiwan's first true presidential election, in 1996.

By the beginning of the 21st century, Taiwan was becoming ever more democratic—and ever more Taiwanese. The school curriculum changed: Taiwan's distinct history was taught, as were Taiwanese languages. Taiwan also began to celebrate its Indigenous population. After the election of President Ma Ying-jeou, in 2008, links of trade, investment, and travel helped reduce tensions with China. Ma was from the KMT, and the party's Chinese heritage and its ties to Taiwan's business elite eased the way to détente with Beijing. But many Taiwanese, particularly the young, feared that forging too close a connection could ultimately give Beijing leverage over Taiwan. In 2014, in what became known as "the Sunflower Movement," named for the flower that served as a symbol of hope, students occupied the Taiwan legislature to oppose a free-trade agreement with China. After a tense standoff, they succeeded in stopping the deal. They also helped propel a political wave that in 2016 brought the election of the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen as president.

As Taiwan was becoming more democratic, China was becoming more autocratic. And as Taiwan was becoming more Taiwanese, China was becoming more fervently nationalist. After the ascent of Xi Jinping to the head of the Communist Party, in 2012, Beijing shifted from incentives to coercion. Xi's government proved adept at bullying companies and entire countries to stop doing business in Taiwan and to recognize China's narrative of sovereignty. Xi also began escalating crackdowns on China's periphery—in Xinjiang province and in Hong Kong.

Ben Rhodes: The path to autocracy

When Xi first took power, Emily Wu was living in Beijing. "I felt the tightening of the space that Taiwan was allowed to navigate," she recalled. "It was all around me—every move that Xi Jinping was making. You're sitting in China and I'm like, *How can I sit here while looking at what is happening and not being able to do anything about it?*" Wu moved back to Taiwan and started a company named Ghost Island Media, picking up on a bit of local black humor that captures Taiwan's ambiguous status. Through podcasts in Mandarin and English, Ghost Island offers a window into the perilous irony of Taiwan's existence: The more successful the Taiwanese are in building their own democracy, the more endangered they are by a China that feels this ghost island eluding its grasp.

During one of our conversations, I used the term *status quo*, and Wu asked me what I thought it meant. "You are not independent, but China has not invaded your country," I replied. Wu paused for a moment, and then said, "I always thought the idea of status quo is really interesting, because in the American context that is what it means. But the idea of it here is: There is no need to declare independence, because we are already independent. This country functions like an independent nation, but someone else says it is not." Recent polling suggests that fewer than 5 percent of people in Taiwan identify as "only Chinese."

For decades, China and Taiwan have conducted intermittent negotiations. From China's perspective, the starting point for any dialogue must be the so-called 1992 Consensus. This refers to the outcome of meetings between Chinese and KMT officials 30 years ago, an outcome that represents anything but consensus. To the Chinese Communist Party, the consensus is that there is one China, and the government in Beijing is the sole legitimate authority. To the KMT, the consensus is that there is one China, but the Republic of China in Taiwan is the legitimate government. To the DPP, there is no consensus, only a fraught political reality to be managed. Past Chinese leaders tolerated differing interpretations, but that changed with Xi. Any negotiations, Xi insists, can only address the terms under which Taiwan submits to the sovereignty of the People's Republic. Tsai has not been willing to enter negotiations on those terms.

China proposes a "one country, two systems" regime, in which Taiwan becomes a formal part of China but maintains an autonomous political

system. There is one big problem with this proposal: Hong Kong. In 1997, in accordance with a formal agreement between the United Kingdom and China, Hong Kong was returned to Chinese sovereignty under a similar one-country-two-systems formula. The agreement stipulated that Hong Kong would be able to maintain its own distinct political, economic, and legal framework for 50 years. The deal seemed to work at first. But as China became more powerful and prosperous, it encroached upon life in Hong Kong. Media outlets started to be bought up by Chinese tycoons. Economic advancement became contingent on not crossing political lines. Large numbers of Mandarin speakers from the mainland started moving into Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong. The school curriculum shifted in the direction of the Communist Party's point of view. It was precisely the kind of outcome that the Sunflower Movement had resisted in Taiwan.

In 2019, Hong Kong authorities sought to appease Beijing by introducing a law that allowed residents of Hong Kong to be extradited to mainland China—removing a guardrail around the city's legal status. Protests exploded and continued for months. Then, in 2020, several "national-security laws" were passed giving the authorities broad powers to crush dissent. Activists were rounded up. Independent media were shut down. One country, two systems was dead. The fate of Hong Kong has had a profound impact on Taiwan. "When China moves in, the freedom is gone," President Tsai told me. "People in Taiwan got a very strong message."

Min-yen Chiang certainly got the message. As a high-school student in Taiwan, he joined the Sunflower Movement. When he went to Hong Kong for university, he embraced the 2014 "Umbrella Movement," whose members occupied Hong Kong's central business district for 79 days, demanding free and fair elections. In 2019, after graduation, Chiang joined the protests in Hong Kong. He learned firsthand what happened next.

I met with Chiang at the Taipei office of *Flow HK*, a magazine that focuses on Hong Kong's movement for democracy. It was a hot day, soupy with humidity, but Chiang switched on a small air conditioner only after we were settled in a spartan conference room. On one wall was a poster that read, in Chinese characters, "Protect Taiwan, Resist China, Support Hong Kong." Chiang spoke softly but with assurance as he described his efforts to change

Taiwan's laws in order to better protect refugees. "When we are supporting Hong Kong," he said, "we are thinking about how to resist China."

Read: The lessons Taiwan is learning from Ukraine

In swallowing Hong Kong, Xi may have made it impossible to repeat the same playbook with Taiwan. But the fate of Ukraine has shown that a bullying neighbor has more extreme options. At the beginning of Russia's war, Chiang organized a press conference with the small Ukrainian population in Taipei. "They always tell me that we have prepared for this war for at least eight years, since 2014," he said, referring to the initial Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. "I don't think Taiwanese young people can confidently say that." But more and more leaders in civic organizations and the press are learning how to speak English so they can communicate better with the outside world. "Ukraine inspired the Taiwanese society a lot, including how Zelensky told their story," Chiang said. He was almost matter-of-fact when he told me, "I would say war between China and Taiwan will definitely happen. We want to win."

The best outcome for Taiwan would be avoiding a war and maintaining the ambiguous status quo. That requires immense discipline, both in presidential statements and in ordinary interactions with the wider world.

When I landed in Taipei, people in spacesuit-style medical uniforms directed bleary-eyed travelers to a series of stations that had to be navigated before entering the country. Early in the pandemic, Chinese propaganda constantly attacked Tsai's response. Mocking the island's reliance on America, Chinese memes suggested that the U.S. was vaccinating pets before offering shots to Taiwan. I scanned a QR code to access my preflight forms and was notified that I needed a Taiwanese phone so the police could ensure I maintained three days of quarantine. At a series of tables, young health workers explained the process of inserting SIM cards into phones. An American next to me became frustrated. But the Taiwanese woman behind the counter was patient and kind, explaining—again and again—how it was done.

This was a snapshot of Taiwan's self-control. To permit widespread COVID infections would validate Beijing's brutal information war against Taiwan—despite the fact that Beijing's stubborn "zero COVID" policy has backfired

on its own economy and society. To be anything less than unfailingly polite to visitors could undermine the relationships that Taiwan is relentlessly trying to build. I was reminded of a comment that Hsiao Bi-khim, Taiwan's representative in Washington, made to me: "We have to be the perfect student in the class to protect ourselves from bullying and help us make friends."

President Tsai plays that part well. She was born to humble circumstances, and her family has deep roots in Taiwan. Indeed, her paternal grandmother is descended from one of the island's Indigenous tribes, the Paiwan. Tsai earned a law degree and was a law-school professor for a time. Entering public life, she served in a variety of government posts on trade and relations with China before joining the DPP in 2004. She steadied the party after corruption scandals and led it to victory following a narrow loss in the 2012 presidential election. Her campaigns have featured her two cats, Think Think and Ah Tsai.

Tsai met with me after receiving yet another U.S. congressional delegation —Taiwan is becoming a must-stop for members of both parties trying to assert their national-security bona fides. A DPP administration makes for an enigmatic interlocutor. In some ways, the party is more comfortable with Republican China hawks than with Democrats wary of projecting American power. Yet the party is also progressive. Tsai formally apologized to Indigenous groups for centuries of mistreatment; she pledged to have their languages taught in schools and to honor Indigenous cultures. Tsai's government was the first in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. Announcing her support for marriage equality, Tsai said, "Let everyone be able to freely love and pursue happiness." Whether American visitors represent the right or left, every delegation gets presidential attention.

In our conversation, Tsai talked about what she had learned from Ukraine. One lesson is simply the need for international support—to defend itself or, better, to avoid a war in the first place. "The Western countries, particularly the U.S., are helping Ukraine. What we see from the Ukraine war is Western countries get together and help Ukraine to fight." Because Taiwan is an island, it will be difficult to resupply in the event of hostilities; Taiwan needs support now. Even though the U.S. didn't enter the war after Russia's invasion, it did offer Ukraine essential weapons, supplies, and budgetary

assistance. “These people *do* help others,” Tsai said, referring to the West as if speaking to her own citizens.


C H I N A

Another lesson of Ukraine is the importance of national character. Outside support, Tsai emphasized, depends on qualities only Taiwan can provide. “You need to have good leadership,” she said, “but more important is the people’s determination to defend themselves, and the Ukrainian people showed that.”

Such determination is essential to the kind of paradigm shift Admiral Lee has advocated. It is a daunting prospect. The more you plan to resist an invasion, the more you risk panicking the population and the more challenges you realize you’ll have to face. Small- and mobile-weapons systems have to be secured against attack by Chinese missiles. Plans must be put in place to ensure that the government can communicate with its people if standard forms of communication are disrupted. The government must also prioritize crucial infrastructure, defend against cyberattacks, stockpile food and water, and decentralize the electricity grid. Instead of creating a Territorial Defense Force, thus far the Tsai administration has opted to bolster its reserve forces; the military has issued a survival handbook on civil defense in case of war.

From the September 2019 issue: Ben Rhodes on Aung San Suu Kyi and the future of Myanmar

Taiwan has term limits, preventing President Tsai from running again. Taiwan’s voters will have an important decision to make in 2024. The opposition KMT party is staking out its position with care. The party’s representative to the United States, an amiable academic and veteran diplomat named Alex Huang, told me that the KMT was more oriented to the U.S. relationship than it had been at times in the past, but it still supports dialogue with China. Instead of the ambitious trade agreements of the Ma Ying-jeou years, Huang said engagement should focus on threat reduction and crisis management. Implicit in his argument was the notion that inflaming China by severing ties and fully embracing the United States could put Taiwan’s very existence at risk—extinguishing both the DPP’s vision of a de facto independent Taiwan and the KMT’s hope for some future conciliation with a changed China. For their part, members of the DPP—and many young Taiwanese—worry that the KMT might turn Taiwan into a second Hong Kong.

Hanging over all of this is the role of the United States. As one Taiwanese expert pointedly asked me: “We can make ourselves a porcupine, but what are *you* going to do?”

On four separate occasions, President Joe Biden has said that the U.S. would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. Each time, the White House put out a follow-up statement saying that U.S. policy had not in fact changed.

This U.S. policy is known as “strategic ambiguity.” The U.S. has no mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, as it does with NATO allies and countries like Japan and South Korea. For decades, there has been bipartisan consensus that declaring a commitment to defend Taiwan could make a war more likely: Taiwan could trigger a conflict by declaring independence, or China could feel compelled to enforce its “One China” red line. By remaining inscrutable, Washington forces China to consider the likelihood of the U.S. coming to Taiwan’s defense, even as Washington accepts the current status quo. Biden’s statements, however, have not been ambiguous and stand in contrast to his statements before the Russian invasion of Ukraine that the U.S. would not intervene directly.

The Biden administration has been more cautious in practice than in rhetoric. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee recently advanced the bipartisan Taiwan Policy Act, which goes beyond authorizing arms sales to financing arms sales with money from American taxpayers. But the administration quietly lobbied to remove provisions that would have been seen by Beijing as moving in the direction of diplomatic recognition—such as making the position of the senior American diplomat in Taipei a job that requires Senate confirmation, as ambassadorships do. The administration has also resisted the Taiwan Policy Act’s call to ramp up training and joint military exercises.

Like President Tsai, the Biden administration is trying to walk a line, better preparing Taiwan while not unnecessarily provoking China. That requires some guesswork about what lessons China may have drawn from Ukraine. Will Xi see Ukraine’s military success as a warning against invading a neighbor that is building up asymmetric capabilities? Or will he decide he has to invade *before* Taiwan is sufficiently armed and trained?

American politics has its own anti-China momentum. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a speech earlier this year in Taipei arguing that the U.S. should formally recognize Taiwan as a nation-state. But performative rhetoric and symbolic gestures that play well to domestic political constituencies suggest a clarity that does not exist. Would the U.S. risk the biggest naval battle since World War II to break a Chinese blockade? Would the U.S. attack an invading Chinese force knowing that U.S. military personnel in Japan, Guam, and possibly Hawaii are within range of Chinese rockets? Would the American people really support a war with the world's most populous country in order to defend Taiwan?

Perhaps for this reason, everyone I spoke with in Taiwan focused more on how the U.S. can help prepare Taiwan than on what the U.S. would do in a conflict. As war has grown more likely, Taiwanese attitudes have shifted too. A poll taken after the invasion of Ukraine showed that the number of people in Taiwan who expect the U.S. to send troops in the event of war fell from 57 to 40 percent, while 73 percent said they would fight to defend themselves. Seeing the difference that eight years of training made for Ukraine, many believe that increased training should be quietly pursued. Given that the U.S. does have a formal agreement to help prepare Taiwan to defend itself, training the Taiwanese would be a logical response and consistent with existing U.S. commitments. In contrast, joint military exercises would suggest a role for the U.S. military that extends beyond preparing Taiwan to defend itself.

The U.S. can also take nonmilitary steps. It should make every effort to deepen and regularize diplomatic openings with China on Taiwan—to avoid an incident that could escalate, and to manage tensions. The U.S. can also expand its trade relationship with Taiwan to make it less vulnerable to Chinese coercion and more embedded in secure supply chains. As the U.S. fosters its own semiconductor industry, it can partner with Taipei to avoid undercutting Taiwan's. The U.S. can work diplomatically to increase Taiwan's cooperation with other democracies, including on practical issues where Taiwan has expertise—public health, cybersecurity, and combatting disinformation. The U.S. and other democracies can also specify to China the far-reaching economic consequences—including sanctions—that would be triggered by any effort to take Taiwan by force.

“What I want to achieve is to make Taiwan more resilient in economic and military terms,” President Tsai told me.

Much of this is already on the agenda for Biden and the Tsai administration. Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, in particular, has articulated the need for Taiwan to counter its diplomatic isolation by emphasizing democracy. He has made inroads in Europe, where some countries have shown a willingness to step up engagement with Taiwan. “This is especially so for Central and Eastern European countries,” he told me. “They were ruled by Communists and understand the difficulties of the threat from an authoritarian country.” Lithuania, for instance, weathered a furious Chinese response after it allowed Taiwan to open an office in its capital, Vilnius. This may seem like a small step, but it boosts morale in Taiwan. As Hsiao Bi-khim told me, “If you tell people on the streets of Taiwan that you are Lithuanian, you will be treated with great admiration.”

Still, these small victories only point up the scale of the challenge. Wu himself has used the term *cognitive warfare* to describe the comprehensive nature of China’s pressure on Taiwan. “They use missiles, air, ships, disinformation, cyberattacks, and economic coercion,” he told me. As a warning sign, China has banned hundreds of exported products from Taiwan. “They claimed that our mangoes tested positive for COVID,” Wu said. “I don’t think you can give a mango a PCR.” Thanks to Chinese pressure, the number of countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan has fallen to a new low of 14. In the 2019 trailer for *Top Gun: Maverick*, the Taiwanese flag that was on Tom Cruise’s flight jacket in the first film was removed to suit Chinese tastes. (It was later restored; the movie was never released in China.)

I asked Wu, who was educated at Ohio State, how he would make the case to a bunch of college-football fans at a tailgate for why they should care about Taiwan. After declaring himself a Buckeye, he paused, sensing the import of the exercise. First, he noted, “if there’s a Chinese invasion, the economic impact is going to be more serious than Ukraine.”

More existential, though, is what could happen *after* a Chinese invasion. If China takes Taiwan, Wu suggested that the Chinese Communist Party’s ambitions could extend to the East China Sea, threatening Japan; to the

South China Sea, where China has built militarized islands and claims an entire body of water bordering several nations; to the Indian Ocean, where China is expanding influence and could establish military bases; and to the Pacific Ocean, where China is working to establish security pacts with island nations. In a world with nationalist-strongman politics ascendant on nearly every continent, Wu's presentation was at once a dire and plausible picture of the stakes for geopolitics as well as human freedom. "If we allow China to continue to expand," Wu told me, "then democracies will be in danger."

On one of my last nights in Taipei, I met with a woman in her early 30s named Billion Lee who helps run Cofacts, an organization that fact-checks disinformation and promotes digital literacy. Relying on a crowdsourced network of more than 2,000 volunteers, Cofacts has done nearly 90,000 fact-checks, mostly on the ubiquitous Taiwanese social-media platform Line. I asked her about Beijing-driven narratives that accompanied the invasion of Ukraine, and they sounded conspicuously similar to those emanating from Moscow. As bombs began falling on Ukraine, the people of Taiwan were bombarded by Chinese-fueled disinformation campaigns: *The U.S. was developing biological weapons in Ukraine. Taiwan will be next if they keep buying weapons from America.* These overlapped with narratives I'd heard about from other Taiwanese: *Afghanistan showed that Americans don't keep their promises. The Americans won't send troops to defend white people in Ukraine, so they will never send them to defend you.* Lee noted that her generation had developed antibodies to such campaigns, but China was focusing on younger demographics as well—teenagers and preteens—through Chinese apps like TikTok.

After a quick dinner of soba noodles, we walked a short distance to a small alley off a bustling main boulevard and met Johnson Liang, a young man with shoulder-length hair and round glasses that made him look like a Taiwanese John Lennon. Liang took out a large metal key to open the door to a shared workspace. We removed our shoes and walked into a back conference room. Lee passed out moon cakes and Liang connected his laptop to a projector that showed his screen on a bare wall.

The two of them explained that they were developing a tool that could enable fact-checkers to compare shared images and transcripts with similar content online, thus making it easier to do the painstaking work of sorting

fact from falsehood. As they went about their work, I scrolled through the latest fact-checks. One involved a lengthy speech that was alleged to have been transcribed from a private recording of French President Emmanuel Macron speaking with diplomats in Paris and blaming the U.S. for all of the trouble in the world. “We must admit that China and Russia have achieved great success over the years under different leadership styles,” Macron supposedly said. (The speech was labeled a falsehood.) Another post, also flagged as false, talked about how the U.S. has been trying to turn “blue” (the KMT) and “green” (the DPP) against each other: “The ultimate goal is to ask Taiwan to die to the last man.”

I sat there reading message after message, all posted in closed chat rooms, meant to bend Taiwanese minds to Beijing’s worldview. The meanings of buzzwords like *cognitive warfare* and *resilience* came into sharper focus. Facing the seemingly bottomless resources of a massive totalitarian state, here were two young people working for free on a Wednesday night, quietly insisting on the notion that there is indeed such a thing as objective reality.

I walked out into Taipei streets filled with people and a pulsing array of advertising. Commuters who’d worked late streamed onto the elevated metro. Packs of teenagers laughed on street corners. All totally ordinary. And yet, to preserve this, Taiwan has to find some mix of the approaches that I’d heard about: preparing for a war while avoiding it; talking to China without being coerced by it; drawing closer to the U.S. without being reduced to a chess piece on the board of a great game; tending to a young democracy without letting divisions weaken it; asserting a unique identity without becoming an independent country.

When I got back to my hotel, I had to descend four levels into the parking garage to enter—the remnant of a COVID protocol—and was reminded of something that Emily Wu had told me. Taiwan conducts annual air-raid drills. They were suspended for the past few years, owing to the pandemic, but resumed this summer. And now, Wu said, people take them more seriously. Underground parking garages were seen as ideal places to take shelter. I looked at the largely deserted expanse of parking spaces around me, a familiar sight now cast in a different light.

“What I want to achieve is to make Taiwan more resilient in economic and military terms,” Tsai had told me. It’s possible to look at this kind of gradual marshaling of society with trepidation. Coupled with the lack of a diplomatic opening to China, there’s a momentum that risks pulling in the direction of conflict. But in Tsai’s attitude, I sensed that resilience serves many purposes. A society that embeds digital literacy and emergency preparedness among its citizens is stronger, just as an economy that isn’t overly reliant on the giant market next door will grow on a broader foundation. Even the effort to build a more progressive democracy comes into play, both in terms of investing domestic constituencies in the government and in forging friendships with democracies abroad.

In the end, Tsai’s agenda is born of necessity. “When we’re strong, resilient, trustworthy, and a good partner,” Tsai said, “people will see our values. That makes us worthy of support.”

The last question I asked President Tsai was whether she had ever wished to govern a normal country with normal problems. She appeared to consider the notion, but allowed herself to betray no emotion. “We may be unfortunate to have a big neighbor next door,” she said. “But that makes us stronger.”

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline “Taiwan Prepares to Be Invaded.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/china-takeover-taiwan-xi-tsai-ing-wen/671895/

The Too-Muchness of Bono

In Dublin with the irrepressible U2 front man

by David Brooks



Bono in Cork, Ireland, 1980 (David Corio)

Bono was 14 when his grandfather died. His family was at the cemetery burying him when his mother, Iris, fainted. His father, Bob, and older

brother, Norman, took her to the hospital to have her checked out, and Bono went over to his grandmother's house, where the family was gathering.

A little while later, one of his uncles burst in, wailing: "Iris is dying. Iris is dying. She's had a stroke."

It was at that instant, Bono says, that his home disappeared. A hole opened up within him. Bono is now 62 and reflecting on how many rock stars lost their mother at a crucial age: John Lennon, Johnny Rotten, Bob Geldof, Paul McCartney—the list of the abandoned goes on and on. Their mothers' deaths left them with this bottomless craving. "People who need to be loved at scale, with 20,000 people screaming your name every night, are generally to be avoided," Bono says with a laugh. "My kind of people."

His mother lingered on for a few more days after the stroke. Bono and his brother were ushered into her hospital room, and they held her hands while the machine keeping her alive was flicked off.

Then Bono, his father, and his brother returned home and almost never spoke of her again. They barely even thought of her, at least for years. "It's not just she's dead; we disappeared her," Bono says.

His father sunk into his opera. He would stand in front of their stereo, surrounded by the strains of *La Traviata*, lost to the rest of the world. Bono would watch him, unable to get to him. "He doesn't notice that I'm in the room looking at him," Bono writes in *Surrender*, his entrancing new memoir.

They no longer had a home, just a house. Bono blamed his father for his mother's death. "I didn't kill her; you killed her, by ignoring her. You won't ignore me," is how Bono puts it in the book. The three men who used to scream at the TV now scream at each other. Their passions are operatic. Bono's living off cans of meat and beans and these little pellets of mush that turn into a kind of mashed potato when boiled. During these years he is drowning, clutching at anything to survive. His self-confidence drains away. He starts struggling in school. He wants to feel special, but there's no evidence that he is. He desperately yearns to have his father pay attention to him. He finds he can win that attention only when they argue and when they

play chess together. He can’t get his father’s attention unless he beats him at something.

His father had a beautiful tenor voice, but he protected himself from disappointment by not allowing himself any dreams about a musical career—and then his great regret in life was that he didn’t have the courage to try to pursue one. No wonder music would be exactly the thing Bono would want to go into, to succeed where his father didn’t, to make his father see him. “There’s a little bit of patricide” in the book, he admits to me. “If you ask yourself the question *How would you take this man down?* the answer would be, *Become the tenor that he wished to be*. Of course!”

Years later, Bono’s musical dreams all came true. But his father remained permanently irascible. One night U2 was playing a big arena in Texas and Bono flew his father to America, where he’d never been, to watch the concert. After the show, his father came backstage, looking emotional. Bono thought something profound was about to happen—the father-son connection he’s been waiting for all of his life. His father stuck out his hand. “Son,” he said, “you’re very professional.” He’d hit the limits of what he could express.

For Bono, getting in touch with his mother became a middle-age quest. When U2 was starting out, they rehearsed in a cottage built into an outer wall of the cemetery where his mother was buried. Bono worked on a song called “I Will Follow,” about a boy whose mother dies. The boy is telling her he will follow her into the grave. It never occurred to Bono that this song might be autobiographical. It never occurred to him to visit the grave of the woman who was lying about 100 yards away from where he was singing; he didn’t even think of her. “That’s the thing about sublimation. It’s almost the farthest we go to bury who we are,” he says now with some wonder.

Not until three decades later did he finally face her absence and what it did to him. In his 50s, he was able to write the lyrics for a song called “Iris (Hold Me Close).” One of them goes: “The ache / in my heart / is so much a part of who I am / Something in your eyes / took a thousand years to get here.”

I tell you all of this because there is something about him I'm trying to understand—I'll call it his "muchness." There is just a lot to the guy—so much driven intensity; so much sensitivity, anger, joy, and propulsive energy. If you watch U2 perform, you see three guys playing their instruments in a cool, understated way, and then this short, crazy Irishman climbing frantically around the stage. Spend any time with him offstage, and he is fantastically entertaining, filling every room with stories and argument. He's a maximalist at nearly everything he does.



U2 in Chicago during their first American tour in 1981 (*left to right*: Adam Clayton, The Edge, Bono, and Larry Mullen Jr.) (Adrian Boot / Urbanimage.tv / Camera Press / Redux)

Musically and in his activist life, Bono exhibits a pattern of overreaching, his lofty goals sometimes exceeding his grasp. One grand project after another—gigantic concert tours, economic development in Africa, addressing the AIDS crisis. (Fighting AIDS and global poverty are his two biggest causes.) Years ago, he was a guest columnist for *The New York Times*. I used to tell him, "It's not 'Sunday Bloody Sunday.' It's just a column. Keep it pointed and prosaic." I think he had trouble adjusting to the concept.

Some people find his muchness annoying and pretentious. He says that people are frequently telling him, "Just cool your jets, man. Just chill the fuck out." But as he writes in his book, "It's hard for me to turn myself off."

Where does all of this come from?

One theory is that the fusion reactor within him was produced by the traumas of his youth. He's yearning to fill the holes—the death of his mother, the absence of his father. By this theory, the story of Bono is one of scarcity, the story of the lifetime he's spent trying to find the love that was ripped away.

Bono himself seems to accept this theory. Success is an "outworking of dysfunction," he argues in the book, "a reward for really, really hard work, which may be obscuring some kind of neurosis."

But people who operate out of a scarcity mindset usually have their resentments on full display. As far as I can tell, Bono doesn't have a resentful bone in his body. Scarcity people never seem fully happy no matter how much they achieve. Bono is generally happy, energized, enthusiastic.

Bono may be Irish, but he's got a lot of that loud, American, go-go type in him—part messiah, part showman.

So perhaps the source of Bono's energy and unrelenting drive may not be scarcity, but abundance. The guy had a rotten childhood, but since then he has been blessed with just about everything life can offer. Perhaps he is simply manically excited to take advantage of it all.

While I spent a few days with him in Dublin this fall, an old book came to mind. It was an analysis of American culture called *People of Plenty*, by the late historian David Potter. The core argument made by the school of historians Potter belonged to is that America's natural character is defined by abundance. The European settlers who first came to the country found forests stretching on forever, flocks of geese so large that they required 30 minutes to take off. All of this possibility drove the settlers sort of mad. They found themselves walking more in a day than they had ever imagined, dreaming dreams bigger than they had ever imagined. These immigrants, the ones who weren't brought here in chains, turned entrepreneurial, disordered, antic, religiously zealous, morally charged, messianic, and perpetually restless. They measured their life by how much they had grown and how far they had climbed. They were propelled by a central contradiction: They had this intense spiritual drive to complete God's plans for humanity on this continent—and they also had this fevered ambition to get really rich. They were propelled by a moral materialism that would never let them rest.

One day I was riding around Dublin with Bono in a tiny Fiat, and the thought occurred to me: *Bono's a little like that*. He may be Irish, but he's got a lot of that loud, American, go-go type in him—part messiah, part showman.

We are sitting in Mount Temple, the school he attended during his teenage years. It is as generic and tattered a building as you can imagine, walls of cinder block painted bright colors. It was built by the World Bank at a time when Ireland was still the kind of poor country that depended on the World Bank.

Bono shows me the bulletin board where Larry Mullen Jr. tacked the notice that read Drummer seeks musicians to form band—the notice that produced U2. Bono shows me the music room where U2 first practiced together. It's just a bunch of high-school chairs and desks with a metal case for instruments in the back and a beat-up piano in the front. Bono plays me a snippet of a Sinatra song.

"Something happened here," Bono says. "Something was going on." It certainly was and it certainly did. You can source Bono's life to the psychic loss of his parents, or you can source it to what came next. Bono may have

been a basket case at 14, but by 18 he had found the five people whom he would spend the rest of his life with—Jesus Christ; his wife, Ali; and his bandmates, Mullen, Adam Clayton, and David Evans—and he met them all at this school. He joined his band and started dating his wife in the exact same week. For a teenager who seemed to be drowning, he did a fantastic job of finding companions for life. Who manages to do all that by age 18?

Read: When U2 went to Bosnia in 1997

This was in the mid-1970s, the age of the Ramones and the Sex Pistols, the high-water mark of punk rock. Bono and his gang were punk rockers. They wore kilts and bomber boots, mohawks and buzz haircuts. At some point in high school, they came across this radical Christian group called Shalom. Bono's father was Catholic, and his mother had been Protestant, and he wanted nothing to do with the Church, or the vicious tribalism that was hurtling Ireland toward civil war. But this fringe Christian collective was different. Its members were suspicious of materialism. They put the poor at the heart of their faith. Their Jesus was this badass Jew who took on the establishment. "They lived like first-century Christians," Bono recalls. "And we thought: *That's pretty punk*. And they seemed to accept who we were. We thought, *Wow, this is great*."

I ask him, wasn't becoming Christian in the 1970s kind of uncool? "We were on a whole other level of uncool. We genuinely thought cool was uncool." Bono's point is that you can't experience God while being cool—it takes pure abandon, the raw act of exposing yourself. That, he explains, is what makes faith like rock and roll.

Bono scrambles our categories. We've all inherited a certain culture-war narrative over the past 50 years. Rock and roll is on one side, along with sex, drugs, and liberation. Religion is on the other side, along with judgmentalism, sexual repression, and deference to authority. But for Bono, Mullen, and Evans—the U2 members who became and remain Christians—punk rock and the radical Christ are on the same team. (Evans became known as The Edge. Bono, born Paul David Hewson, was given the nickname that eventually became his stage name—shortened from Bono Vox of O'Connell Street—by his best friend since childhood.) The three of them embraced a faith that simply bypassed the encrustations of 2,000 years of

religious civilization and returned straight to Jesus: the helpless baby who was born on a bed of straw and shit; the wandering troubadour who put the poor, the marginalized, and the ailing at the center of his gaze; the rebel outsider who confronted the power structures of his society and took them all on at once. This alternative form of Christianity is something that, say, American evangelicals could have adopted. But mostly they did not.

The boys formed their band, went through the hard apprenticeship of rejection that all teenage bands go through, and then finally got to make an album, *Boy*. Most rock albums, especially in those days, were about rebellion, coming of age, savvy knowingness, but this was an album about innocence, about seeing with the eyes of a child. U2 was announcing that the band was going to be in this world, but not of it.



Members of U2 pose for a photo in their Volkswagen van in 1980. (Martyn Goddard)

From that first album, U2's strengths were evident. "Where others would hear harmony or counterpoint," Bono writes, "I was better at finding the top line in the room, the hook, the clear thought." Through the next couple of decades, the band turned out hit after hit, and although Bono is always saying how punk he is, I just hear popular, mainstream rock: "With or Without You," "Where the Streets Have No Name," "Beautiful Day."

The band's other great strength is the pseudo-religious power of their concerts. Bono was influenced by an obscure book called *The Death and Resurrection Show: From Shaman to Superstar*, by Rogan P. Taylor, which argues that modern performance culture has its ancient roots in shamanism. When we go to a concert, we enter the presence of a mystic who interacts with the spirit world and brings spiritual energies into the physical one. "We're religious people even when we are not. We find ritual and ceremony powerful," Bono says. "We were always interested in the ecstatic. I think our music reflects that."

B*oy* was a success, and the band was on its way. But then The Edge, the lead guitarist, declared that he needed to quit. He told Bono he didn't see how they could be both believers and in a band. He didn't see how they could be global stars and fulfill the humbler "calling to serve a local community." The world was so broken and needed love; what good could a few songs do? Bono, experiencing some of the same doubts, replied, "If you're out, I'm out."

Their manager, Paul McGuinness, who had just signed a bunch of contracts for their coming tour, was astounded. "Am I to gather from this that you have been talking with God?" he asked skeptically. Yes. "Do you think God would have you break a legal contract?"

But it was something else that really kept the band together. The Edge began to write "Sunday Bloody Sunday," calling for an end to sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. With that song U2 saw how rock could be not just an expression of what was going on in their lives, but a vehicle to help heal a broken world. They would be missional or not at all.

The band stayed together, but the tension The Edge identified has never gone away. How do you reconcile the humility of faith with the egotism of superstardom, the purity of the Holy Spirit with the material excess of show business, the drive to achieve musical greatness with the posture of surrender to grace?

Bono's memoir can be read as a spiritual adventure story, a *Pilgrim's Progress* with superyachts and supermodels (or as Bono jokes, "The pilgrim's lack of progress"). On the one hand, it is called *Surrender*, and this

act of surrendering himself to a higher love remains a guiding hope in his life. "I'd always be first up when there was an altar call, the 'come to Jesus' moment," he writes in the book. "I still am. If I was in a café right now and someone said, 'Stand up if you're ready to give your life to Jesus,' I'd be first to my feet. I took Jesus with me everywhere and I still do. I've never left Jesus out of the most banal or profane actions of my life."

Read: U2's political, unstoppable, grating cheerfulness

On the other hand, he also walks around with the most gargantuan worldly ambitions burning in his chest. From the beginning, Bono wanted U2 to be like the Beatles and the other great bands. "Megalomania started at a very early age," he jokes. "It's unbelievable. God almighty." All these decades, Bono and his bandmates have been relentlessly chasing the perfect rock-and-roll album, the perfect show. He now admits this often made him impossible. Throughout the years, Bono insisted that U2 produce a new sound with every album, as the Beatles had. In the book he describes U2's creative process in great detail, and it's basically a series of scenes in which Bono is haranguing his mates: "Too familiar!" "Making a band, breaking a band, remaking a band."

This grand ambitiousness has meant that they've taken a lot of musical risks, not all of which have paid off. Or as Bono puts it in *Surrender*, "Our best work is never too far from our worst." During one reinvention moment he asks himself, "Why would I put everything at risk again? What's got into me? What gets into me?"

Bono's Influences

Though best known as a musician, Bono is also a visual artist. We asked him to draw the musicians who helped to shape his own sound.



JOHNNY CASH



PATTI SMITH



NINA SIMONE



DAVID BOWIE



FRANK SINATRA



JOEY RAMONE

(Illustrations by Bono)

I ask Bono about his core motivator. Is it the quest for achievement, for intimacy, for fame? “I’m ‘I don’t want to blow it’ motivated,” he says. “I’ve got these incredible opportunities and I don’t want to blow it.” He emails me a few days later to make the point that the enemy of greatness is not crap; the enemy of greatness is “very good.” You have to hammer, exhausted, through “very good” to get to greatness.

This ferocity is often hard on those around him. One day Bono worked himself up into such a rage that The Edge had to punch him on the side of the head. “The friendships in the band have been ins and outs for sure,” Bono says. “I have been insufferable at times. Pushing them and prodding them. Not wanting to blow it.”

I ask him whether the rage he keeps talking about is against only the injustices of the world, or also directed at the people he loves. “Both, sadly,” he says. “And I’ve had to apologize to my bandmates for the hectoring they’ve received over the years.” Has he brought his rage home to his family? “I have lost my temper a few times as a father.” (He has four children, all adults now.) “And that has brought me deep shame. But I’m that guy. I’m a bit wound up.”

The band’s worldly ambitions paid off in the most spectacular way. By the time U2 was rich and famous, Bono had entered the lofty height of celebrity—a life that doesn’t look much like the radical simplicity of the first-century Christians. He’s got a villa in the south of France. He’s friends with Christy Turlington and Brad Pitt. One time he was at a small White House dinner party with Barack Obama and, after an allergic reaction to some red wine, he left the table in the middle of the meal to take a nap in the Lincoln Bedroom. Another time Mikhail Gorbachev showed up at his front door in Dublin carrying a giant teddy bear. And another time he thought he’d peed his pants while sitting on Frank Sinatra’s couch. The stories in the book can be sidesplitting.

Bono’s social energy is on par with all his other kinds of energy, and as he speaks you realize the guy knows everybody—Bob Dylan, Pavarotti, Billy Graham, and Larry Summers; the pope, George W. Bush, Allen Ginsberg, and Quincy Jones. He’s so famous himself, he’s not name-dropping; he’s just thrilled to meet people. I have a theory that celebrities love to hang out

with one another because deep down, they are still the sad outsiders they were in high school, and they're thrilled that these cool people want to hang out with them.

Rowing for heaven by day and drinking with superstars by night—Bono's spiritual adventure is the greatest high-wire act in show business. You can't help wondering which way he'll go. Will he be ruled by his rage or his compassion? Can he find inner stillness amid the raucous go-go of his life? Can he keep his focus on the celestial spheres when the people on the beach at Nice are so damn sexy? Can he die to self, or has his permanent tendency toward self-seriousness and pomposity become too great? If the guy is so concerned with his soul, why did he spend so much time writing about his hair? The ultimate questions at the center of it all are the same ones that have haunted American history: Can you be great and also good? Can you serve the higher realm while partying your way through this one?

Three things save him. The first is his wife, Ali. She is the star of the memoir, light and warmth, solidly grounded, deeply souled. Ali's the one who tells him when he's becoming too self-serious and losing his sense of mischief. She's his emotional foundation and spiritual partner. "Ali will let her soul be searched only if you reciprocate and she is ready for the long dive," Bono writes. "Best to arrive at her fort defenseless to have half a chance at challenging her own unbroachable defense system."

Their home near Dublin has a gigantically long kitchen table made from a tree trunk that hosts dinners of 20 to 30 people, with dancing, drinking, and arguing about world affairs past 1 a.m. The place has the spirit of the perfect Irish pub. "It turns out I'm oriented toward horizontal relationships rather than vertical ones," he says. His home is communal. His band is communal. His philanthropic work is communal. His life is rooted in peer relationships.

The second thing that saves him is his activism. About a decade ago, I went to a U2 concert. As I drove home, one of Bono's people called me and asked if I wanted to hang out with him at his hotel. This is my dream: hanging out with a rock star after a concert. I got to the hotel bar and there was Bono, an archbishop, some World Bank economists, and a West African government official. We ended up talking about developing-world debt obligations until early in the morning.

Celebrity activists are in bad odor these days. Who cares what privileged superstars think? Bono has certainly fallen into many of those traps, but he is also a celebrity activist like no other. He knows who the deputy national security adviser is. He knows who the staff on the Senate Appropriations Committee are. He shows his face not just at large televised events, but in one-on-one meetings lobbying House staffers and mid-level White House officials on developing-world debt relief and money for drugs to combat HIV. “One of the greatest characters in my life over the last twenty-five years has been the capital city of the United States of America,” he writes.

He may be a mystic shaman on the concert stage, but his view of social change is unromantic; he knows that it starts with relentless pressure. (One day Bono was haranguing George W. Bush because AIDS medications weren’t getting to Africa fast enough. Finally, Bush interrupted him: “Can I speak? I am the president.”) It’s about long, tiring negotiations and compromise—stale coffee and, as he puts it to me, “damp cheese plates, soggy sandwiches late at night.” And it’s about rejecting fundamentalism in all its forms, religious or ideological. Stay flexible; make constant, steady progress.

Bono has been ruthlessly single-minded. He will meet with anybody who can help those causes, no matter how noxious to him they might be on other subjects. The most famous example is his successful campaign to woo Jesse Helms to support aid to Africa.

In *Surrender*, Bono relays a story, told to him by Harry Belafonte, that explains his methodology. When Bobby Kennedy was appointed attorney general, the civil-rights community was deeply suspicious of him. Martin Luther King Jr. hosted a meeting where the other leaders trashed Kennedy as an Irish redneck who would set back civil rights. King slammed his hand on the table and asked, “Does anyone here have anything positive to say about our new attorney general?” *No, that’s the point*, the others said; *there’s nothing good about his record*. King responded, “I’m releasing you into the world to find one positive thing to say about Bobby Kennedy, because that one positive thing will be the door through which our movement will have to pass.” They found that RFK was close to his bishop—and through that door they converted him into a great champion for civil rights.

Bono is often teased about his activism—*I'm going to save the world, and I don't care how many magazine covers I have to be on to do it*. But this work has been a useful unfolding of his faith. "Your faith is an action," he tells me. Preach the Gospel, but only use words if absolutely necessary. His activism has been the way he can take the fame life gave him and turn it into a useful currency. "While I hope God is with us in our mansions on the hill or holiday homes by the sea," he writes, "I know God is with the poorest and most vulnerable."

His activism has also connected him with one of his enduring loves: America. At a time when many of us Americans feel a sense of national decline, Bono has a bracing alternative view. "America might be the greatest song the world has yet to hear," he told an audience of Americans at the Fulbright Association in March. "It's an exciting thought that after 246 years of this struggle for freedom, after 246 years of inching and crawling towards freedom, sometimes on your belly, sometimes on your knees, sometimes marching, sometimes striding—this might be the moment you let freedom ring."

The third thing that has saved him has been his holy longing, or, as he might put it, God's longing for him. Bono's soul is perpetually aflame, and this drives him forward, nurtures his growth and his heavenly aspirations.

Bono has reached a point where he feels grateful for his father. In *Surrender*, Bono paints a warm, sympathetic portrait of the old man—who was in his own way a charming, talented guy who suffered a loss he could not process, who had his 14-year-old son coming at him with "guns blazing."

These days, Bono—this noisy and garrulous man—craves silence. He points out that Elijah had to go to the cave to hear God, and God was heard not in the thunder and the wind but in the sound of silence. All of his life, he has reinvented himself. Now he thinks it may be time to do it again. "Music might be a jealous God. It was always the easiest thing for me. I wake up with melodies in my head," he says. "But now I feel more like: *Shut up and listen. If you want to take it to the next level, you may have to rethink your life.*"

What does that look like? “The flag of surrender has come around again for me.” What does *surrender* mean exactly? “It’s just out of my reach. I’m getting to the place where I do not have to *do*, but just *be*. It’s trying to transcend myself. It’s like my antidote to me. The antidote to me is surrender.”

The ending of his book is a beautiful evocation of peace—a riotous man’s homage to stillness. He writes the book in lyrics, not paragraphs: “The wound of my teenage years that had become an opening is now closed / the search for home is now over / it is you / I am home / no longer in exile.” Can a guy like Bono really achieve stillness? Especially when he has so much yet to say?

It’s hard to know the answer to that. At one point he told me that throughout his whole life, he’s been searching for home, and that lately he has come to realize that home is not a place, but a person. I neglected to ask the follow-up question. Is that person Ali? Jesus? Any random soul he happens to be in front of that day? Maybe all of the above.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline “Bono’s Great Adventure.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/u2-bono-memoir-surrender/671894/

How Much Would You Pay to Save Your Cat's Life?

For $15,000, you can get your pet a new kidney.

by Sarah Zhang



Sherlock donated a kidney in 2019. (Caroline Tompkins for The Atlantic)

This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic*, Monday through Friday.* *[Sign up for it here.]*

When I first met Strawberry, age 16, she was lying on her back, paws akimbo. Her cat belly was shaved bare, and black stitches ran several inches down her naked pink skin.

A radiologist squirted ultrasound goop on her abdomen while two veterinary students in dark-blue scrubs gently held down her legs—not that this was really necessary. Strawberry was too tired, too drugged, or simply too out of it from her surgery the previous day to protest. In the dim light of the radiology room, her pupils were dilated into deep black pools. She slowly turned her head toward me. She turned away. She looked around at the small crowd of doctors and students surrounding her, as if to wonder what on God's green earth had happened for her to end up like this.

What had happened was that Strawberry had received a kidney transplant. A surgical team at the University of Georgia had shaved off patches of her long ginger fur, inserting catheters in her leg and neck to deliver the cocktail of drugs she would need during her hospital stay: anesthesia, painkillers, antibiotics, blood thinners, and immunosuppressants. Then a surgeon named Chad Schmiedt carefully cut down the midline of her belly—past the two shriveled kidneys that were no longer doing their job and almost to her groin. Next, he stitched into place a healthy new kidney, freshly retrieved from a living donor just hours earlier.

Schmiedt is one of only a few surgeons who perform transplants on cats, and is therefore one of the world's foremost experts at connecting cat kidneys. When he first greeted me with a broad smile and a handshake, I was struck by how his large, callused hand engulfed mine. In the operating room, though, his hands work with microscopic precision, stitching up arteries and veins only millimeters wide. This is the hardest part, he told me, like sewing "wet rice paper." Once the donor kidney was in place, it flushed pink and Schmiedt closed Strawberry back up. (As in human transplants, the old kidneys can stay in place.) It was then a matter of waiting for her to wake up and pee. She had done both by the time of her ultrasound.

Not that Strawberry could understand any of this—or that any cat understands why we humans insist on bringing them to vet offices to be poked and prodded by strangers. But without the transplant, she would die of kidney failure, an affliction akin to being gradually poisoned from within.

Other treatments could slow her kidney disease, which is common in older cats, but they could not stop it. This is why Strawberry's owner decided to spend $15,000 on a kidney—a last resort to save her life, or at least extend it.

I didn't meet her owner in the hospital that day. Strawberry would need to be hospitalized for at least a week after the surgery, and cat owners—who come from all over the country and even the world for kidney transplants; Schmiedt's farthest patient traveled to Athens, Georgia, from Moscow—cannot always stay the entire time, because of work or family responsibilities. Strawberry's owner had dropped her off right before the surgery and would pick her up after she recovered.

But also, the owner didn't want her name in a magazine article about $15,000 kidney transplants. (That's the cost of the surgery at UGA; with travel and follow-up care, the total can be two or three times that amount.) She wasn't alone in not wanting to be named. In the course of reporting this story, I spoke with more than a dozen owners, several of whom were wary of going public about their cat's transplant. Others were happy, even eager, to share the experience, but they too sometimes told me of judgment radiating from family or acquaintances. "I wouldn't think of saying to somebody, 'Wow, that's an expensive car,'" one owner told me. "But people seem pretty free to say, 'Wow, you spent a lot of money on a cat.'"

From the March 2012 issue: How your cat is making you crazy

And it *is* a lot of money. For decades, Americans' collective spending on veterinary care has been rising—it exceeded $34 billion in 2021—a sign of a broader shift in how we think about pets. Our grandparents might have found it indulgent to allow pets on the living-room couch, let alone the bed. But as birth rates have fallen, pets have become more intimate companions. (In my own household, our cat Pete is really quite insistent on taking up the full third of the bed that he believes is rightfully his.) Cats and dogs now have day cares; health insurance; funerals; even trusts, should an owner die an untimely death—a proliferation of services that implies new obligations to pet ownership, turning it into something more like parenthood.



Chad Schmiedt, a surgeon who performs kidney transplants on cats, with his own cat, Marigold (Caroline Tompkins for *The Atlantic*)

This is, in fact, why $15,000 for a kidney transplant provokes so much judgment, isn't it? The unease with the money is an unease with the status of pets. Our very language is inadequate: They are not simply property, as *pet owner* implies, nor are they fully equivalent to children, as *pet parent* implies. They occupy a space in between. What do we owe these animals in our care—these living creatures that have their own wants and wills but cannot always express them? And what does what we *think* we owe them say about us?

Strawberry's kidney transplant took place at the University of Georgia's Veterinary Teaching Hospital, a sprawling medical complex several miles outside downtown Athens. My first impression was how much it looked like a human hospital. There were, however, occasional reminders of more unusual goings-on: a horse turd on the sidewalk, a golden retriever trouncing through the glass atrium.

The teaching hospital had long outgrown its first building, a former livestock-judging pavilion. When UGA's vet school was founded in 1946, it was, like all vet schools at the time, focused on training students to care for farm animals. Its large-animal department still sees livestock; when I was there, a pig was having surgery and a foal was getting an MRI. But over the decades, vet schools have shifted their focus to "small animals," a.k.a. pets. Vet students graduating today overwhelmingly go on to treat dogs and cats. Dogs make up the largest share of the patients that come to UGA's hospital, with cats a growing second. (There is also the occasional exotic pet. A few years ago, doctors removed a fatty tumor from a prized koi fish, running water over its gills during the surgery.)

The hospital's layout reflects the evolution of veterinary care. It's divided into departments, each dedicated to a different specialty: cardiology, dermatology, orthopedics, oncology, ophthalmology, and more. Schmiedt himself rotated through these departments as a UGA vet student in the late '90s; he then did two surgical internships followed by a residency at the University of Wisconsin, where he learned to perform kidney transplants—a trajectory of advanced training and specialization not unlike that in human

medicine. Others at UGA specialize in total artificial-hip replacements or minimally invasive laparoscopic surgery.

Cats in particular have been beneficiaries of this evolution. "When I was growing up, it was, *Why would you take your cat to the vet? If your cat's sick, you get another cat*," says Drew Weigner, a veterinarian and former president of the nonprofit EveryCat Health Foundation. Cats lived outside; they came and went. Even in the late '80s, when he opened a practice specializing in cats in Atlanta, the idea struck others as "hilarious and crazy." But cats by then were coming indoors. That physical closeness turned into emotional closeness. Weigner's practice thrived.

Read: Purring is a love language no human can speak

In the oncology department at UGA, when pets finish chemotherapy, the staff have a tradition adopted from human cancer wards of ringing a celebratory bell. Back in the '60s, Weigner points out, your cat wouldn't have gotten chemo. It probably wouldn't even have been diagnosed with cancer. More likely, a sick cat would just go off by itself and die. But an owner nowadays can bring their cat in for biopsies, X-rays, and ultrasounds —followed by chemo, radiation, and immunotherapy. The list of options is long, the sums of money to spend very large. You can go to great lengths to treat an ailing pet, even if how far you should go isn't always so easy to answer.

But among all of these treatments, cat kidney transplantation poses a unique ethical dilemma. The kidney has to come from somewhere, and that somewhere—or do we say *someone*?—is another cat.

Even among cat people, kidney transplants are controversial. One owner told me she was called a "kidney stealer" by fellow cat owners in a Facebook group for those with pets suffering from chronic kidney disease. In the U.K., the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has explicitly come out against using living donor cats in transplants, arguing that the surgery inflicts pain and discomfort on an animal that derives no benefit. A cat, after all, cannot consent to giving away a kidney.

To be clear, the donor cats are not killed. Like humans, cats can survive with one kidney. When Clare Gregory and his colleagues at UC Davis pioneered cat kidney transplants in the late ’80s, he made sure that owners adopted the donor—a policy that all three hospitals performing cat kidney transplants in the U.S. continue to uphold. No other types of organ transplants are done in cats, because they would involve killing the donor, which the vets and ethicists I talked with universally condemned. (Gregory tried doing kidney transplants in dogs first, but the canine immune system is unusually reactive, leading to kidney rejection.)

Strawberry’s donor was a one-year-old male tabby with a white chin. He was already up and about the morning after his surgery, keen to receive chin rubs; the young and healthy donor cats [tend to bounce back faster](#) than the older and sicker recipient cats. He’d be ready to go home with Strawberry’s owner in a matter of days.

In a previous life, he was destined to be a lab cat. UGA bought him from a commercial breeder that sells cats for use in medical or veterinary research. Numbers tattooed into his ears attest to his former fate. The University of Wisconsin buys research cats to use as kidney donors, too, and the University of Pennsylvania, which [runs the third and largest cat-transplant program](#) in the country, keeps a small colony of donor cats sourced from a shelter.

[Read: Cats give the laws of physics a biiiiig stretch](#)

This is where the blanket assertion that donor cats gain nothing from the transplants gets more complicated, says James Yeates, CEO of the nonprofit World Federation for Animals, who has written about the ethics of these surgeries. Had these particular cats not been chosen as donors, they may well have lived out the remainder of their life in a lab or shelter. Losing a kidney does come with risks, as well as a lot of pain and discomfort. But most of the donors go on to live long, healthy lives—in many cases, very cushy lives with extremely devoted owners. Schmiedt told me of one owner whose cat died of heart failure right before the transplant but who decided to adopt the prospective donor anyway. Another asked for the exact dimensions of the cage in the hospital, so they could build the cat a shelter of the same size to ease the transition home.

In a way, Yeates says, kidney transplants simply lay bare the extremes in how we treat animals. In America, a cat can be a cherished pet that feasts on pasture-raised chicken or a lab subject deliberately infected with pathogens or an unwanted animal euthanized because no one will pay to save its life. Simple dumb luck separates one cat's fate from another's. But, for the price of a kidney, a cat can ascend into the tier of beloved companion.

This summer, I visited Kassie Phebillo, a self-proclaimed "cat lady" whose cat Banquo got a kidney transplant at UGA in 2019. Her house outside Austin looked like every other beige house in every other beige Texas subdivision—but I knew I had arrived at the right one when I spotted a sign declaring Black Cats Welcome Here. (Banquo is a black cat.) Kassie and her husband, Taylor, had just moved in a few months earlier; they'd designed the house in part to accommodate their entire animal family. Banquo lives in the large master suite because the Phebillos like to keep him separate from the others due to his regimen of immunosuppressant drugs. Bia, their oldest cat, has a bedroom and bathroom upstairs that they added just for her. George, their dog, and Sherlock, the donor cat, have the run of the rest of the house. They have become best friends.

Sherlock, a sandy tabby with white paws, was sprawled on the kitchen table with his toys when Kassie opened the door. There was no trace of the surgical scar that once ran down his belly. I scratched his head—he too has numbers tattooed into his ears—and he immediately started to purr. When Kassie and I moved to the dining-room table, George, "a big rescue mutt," followed us and Sherlock in turn followed him. Kassie told me she'd grown up with cats in rural Indiana. After college, she adopted Bia, a sickly calico kitten that she bottle-fed back to health, and then her vet told her about a black kitten in need of a home. That was Banquo. Bia and Banquo were the two constants of her itinerant 20s. They were with her through crappy jobs and bad breakups. She's known them longer than she's known her husband.

In the spring of 2019, when Banquo was about eight years old, a vet at a routine checkup noticed that his kidneys felt swollen. An ultrasound revealed that they were riddled with cysts. His diagnosis was polycystic kidney disease, a genetic disorder with no cure. Kassie could give him comfort care, but nothing would ultimately stop the cysts from taking over his kidneys. He did not have long to live.

But there was one last possible option—a kidney transplant. Kassie was referred to another vet at her practice, Melena McClure, who had gotten a transplant for her own cat. McClure was frank about what that had entailed. Her cat had needed a second surgery to deal with complications, and then tons of blood work and follow-ups to fine-tune the dosage of immunosuppressants, which prevent rejection. The drugs can have their own unpleasant side effects. “I swear he had diarrhea for four months straight,” McClure told me. He eventually got back to his playful old self. But he still needed immunosuppressants twice a day every day for the rest of his life. “I have to be there every 12 hours, or else he dies,” she said.

The Phebillos slowly took this all in. The diagnosis had come at an especially difficult time. Kassie suffered from anxiety and depression, and the stress of her then-job had sent her down a spiral even before Banquo’s diagnosis. Compared with losing him, the complete lifestyle shift of having a transplant cat didn’t seem so daunting. And they could afford it; Taylor had just gotten a signing bonus from his new tech job. But still, they agonized. “Are we making his life worse or better?” she wondered. She considered how Banquo genuinely seemed to love spending time with humans. In contrast to Bia, a high-strung cat that needs anxiety medication, he sought out cuddles. He liked to play. He was enjoying life. He would want to live, she decided. The surgery was worth a shot.

The median survival time for cats that get kidney transplants is about two years. Many owners who have recently gone to the extreme to save their cat’s life find themselves once again asking when to let them go.

I better understood why Banquo inspired such dedication when I finally met him. A regal cat with a smoky black mane and golden eyes, he carries himself with the self-possessed air of a wild creature, as if you would be lucky to have his attention bestowed upon you. This is, I think, the particular appeal of a certain kind of cat. Whereas humans have bred dogs to dutifully attend to our every grunt and point, cats have retained that streak of independence, that touch of wildness. To gain a cat’s affection is to be chosen. “Watch,” Kassie said, after she’d opened the door to the master bedroom and lain down on the bed. She stretched out her arms. Banquo fell into them, purring.

His preternatural ability to calm her is what persuaded Taylor to go forward with the transplant. Whenever things get bad, Kassie will lie down, and Banquo will come to her.

Banquo is also just a generally chill dude, which is in fact an important consideration for a kidney transplant. Cats that hate vets, that hate pills, or that hate car rides—if you know cats, you know this is a lot of cats—simply would not be able to handle a long hospital stay and drugs twice a day. When the time came for Banquo's evening medication, I watched Taylor casually pop a liquid capsule into the cat's mouth. And then Banquo sauntered over to his wet food. (As someone who has had to force—yes, *force* is unfortunately the only correct word here—my own cats to take medication, I admit to watching this scene with some envy.)

This fall, though, Kassie told me that Banquo had become precipitously ill again. At first, they didn't know what the problem was. Sepsis? Cancer? An emergency vet recommended euthanasia. If it was cancer, Kassie wasn't sure Banquo could make it through chemo with his existing health issues.

He turned out to have cysts on his liver, which McClure assured her were very treatable with surgery, but Banquo has had his ups and downs since that operation. Kassie told me she would now be at peace if Banquo's time came. She didn't want to do anything that would extend Banquo's life without improving it. "I didn't want to be selfish," she told me. "There's just a fine line between doing what you can for your pet and being selfish."

The median survival time for cats that get kidney transplants is about two years—though I did speak with one owner whose cat survived 12 years. This means that many owners who have recently gone to the extreme to save their cat's life find themselves once again on the brink and asking when to let them go.

Melena McClure—Kassie Phebillo's vet in Austin, whose cat Beaker got a transplant in May 2017—noticed signs of diabetes about three years after his surgery. He suddenly dropped two pounds and started peeing a lot. McClure started him on insulin, shaved a patch between his shoulders for a continuous blood-sugar monitor, and stopped giving him the steroids that were pushing him into diabetes. This came with a trade-off: Keep him off

the steroids and he could tip into organ rejection. Put him back on and he could tip into diabetes. Then Beaker was also diagnosed with suspected lymphoma in his intestines, which required chemo, which gave him nausea, which in turn required anti-nausea medication and appetite stimulants. At one point, he was on 12 or 13 different medications.





Left: Zorro, an English bulldog, waiting for an appointment with the UGA Veterinary Teaching Hospital's orthopedics service. *Right*: The UGA Veterinary Teaching Hospital's exotic-animals service evaluates Bunny, a rabbit, for sinus issues. (Caroline Tompkins for *The Atlantic*)

I met McClure and her husband, Jon Twichell, over coffee one morning in Austin after her overnight shift at an emergency animal hospital. She struck me as particularly no-nonsense, a vet who would not sugarcoat your cat's bad diagnosis. To her, Beaker's health problems were a challenge to solve using her considerable expertise. "Okay, here's a problem; I can fix this. Let's go," is how she described her thinking. That's how it was when Beaker's diagnosis was chronic kidney failure and the solution was a

transplant. “But once you start hitting multiple problems,” she told me, “it’s like a giant game of whack-a-mole.”

By then, Beaker was wobbly and not eating. He wasn’t himself anymore. She did what she tells owners to do in this situation: Pick two or three of your pet’s favorite activities. If they do those things, mark it in a calendar as a good day. If not, a bad day. When the bad days outnumber the good ones, it’s time. “I was doing it with a colored pencil,” Twichell told me. “Bad days, red square on a calendar.” It was red, red, red. In January, almost five years after his transplant, they decided to put Beaker down. He was just shy of 17.

Peggy Cochrane’s cat Petey started to decline a year and a half after his surgery. When he was first diagnosed with chronic kidney disease, she had already watched three of her other cats die of the same affliction. “I couldn’t bear not to try to do something,” she told me. “I promised myself I’d do anything I could.” For two and a half years, she managed Petey’s illness as she had her other cats’, by giving him fluids to deal with the consequences of his failing kidneys. But he kept getting worse and by the time she decided on a transplant, she says, he was very sick, probably sicker than he should have been to qualify. Petey did well after his transplant—until one day he didn’t. He was in so much pain, he didn’t want to be picked up.

Petey ended up spending several days in an animal ICU, part of that time in an oxygen tent. “We were taking some pretty extreme measures,” she said. It was time. She had him put to sleep. “To see a little kitty die like that, it tortured me,” she said. She still thinks doing the transplant was the right decision. But she recognized all that she had put him through. “It wasn’t easy for him,” she said. “And then to see it not work. And just to see him die.”

I could tell this still weighed on her, because she turned the conversation around on me: What about the other owners I’d talked with? she asked. Were they mixed on whether they would do a transplant again?

The owners I talked with who had gone ahead with a kidney transplant almost universally impressed upon me that their cat was special—exceptionally affectionate, unusually loyal. Many had had multiple cats, but

the one that got the transplant was unique: “Cat of a lifetime.” “My soulmate.”

Most of the owners were well-off enough to afford the transplant outright. They had jobs that paid good money; one cited the hot stock market in 2021. And most did not have children.

But some struggled to pay for the surgery. I spoke with one owner who started a GoFundMe for her cat’s transplant; she failed to raise enough money, and her cat died of kidney failure. Another took out a line of credit on her house to pay for the surgery. In 2015, Andre Gonciar, an archaeologist in Buffalo, New York, used the money he and his wife had put away for a down payment. It didn’t feel like a sacrifice, Gonciar told me, because he couldn’t conceive of trading their cat Oki’s life for a house or a car or just more money in the bank. He said that the bond he felt with Oki was as intense as the bond he felt with humans, if not more so. “There is no inherent badness in the soul of a cat or a dog,” he said. “Their soul will never be mean or treacherous. They will not hurt you.” The psychologist John Archer writes that pets provide people with “the type of unconditional adoring relationship that has eluded them (and indeed most of us) when other human beings are involved.” Money may not be able to buy happiness, but it can, possibly, delay the end of such a relationship.

“You go buy your cars and your trips,” as another owner, Jason Matthews, put it. “I’m going to save my best friend in the world.” Several cat owners I interviewed asked rhetorically how spending tens of thousands of dollars on a cat was any different from spending tens of thousands of dollars on a luxury that nobody needs.

And it is seen as different. In America, the allure of material comfort is accepted without a second thought. But the yearning for a deep emotional bond with an animal is not.

In his classic 1986 treatise on human-animal relationships, *In the Company of Animals*, James Serpell described a “vague notion that there is something strange, perverse or wasteful about displaying sentimental affection for animals.” The ascendancy of pets engendered, as change so often does, a degree of suspicion about some new moral rot in society.

Serpell traces the modern history of pet-keeping in the English-speaking world back to medieval Britain, when lapdogs became fashionable among noble ladies. For everyone else, domesticated animals still served a utilitarian purpose: Oxen plowed, pigs became meat, cats caught mice. The lapdogs were too small, too useless for any work, but ladies liked to pamper them. In the 16th century, Mary Queen of Scots had a coterie of tiny dogs that she dressed in blue-velvet suits. A book of British history from around that time derisively described lapdogs as "instruments of follie to plaie and dallie withall, in trifling away the treasure of time, to withdraw their minds from more commendable exercises."

Pet ownership eventually trickled down to the growing middle class, but perhaps it never quite shook the sense of frivolity associated with the aristocracy and with women. In the 20th century, newspapers highlighted sensational stories like that of a "millionairess" who spent ₤8,000 to buy out the entire business section of a jet for her dog. Tales about the fabulously wealthy indulging their pets seem to imply a dark underside to caring so much about animals: an indifference to the suffering of fellow humans. How many starving orphans could that money have saved instead? Of course, you could lob the same critique at spending ₤8,000 on jewels, which some surely have, but pets are not simply property. They have just enough humanlike qualities—pluck, loyalty, affection—that actually treating them as humans touches a particular nerve.

When Serpell looks beyond the English-speaking world, the history of animal companionship gets more complicated. In Indigenous societies around the world, stories of intense emotional bonds between humans and animals are common. In Australia, Aborigines kept dingo pups that slept inside their huts. "He caresses it like a child, eats the fleas off it, and then kisses it on the snout," wrote one 19th-century chronicler of a man with a dingo. The Kalapalo people of Brazil tamed birds that they buried near their houses after death. It was not unusual, across many cultures, for women to feed baby animals from the breast: dogs, monkeys, pigs, deer, even bear cubs. In the Colombian Amazon, women suckled puppies and pre-chewed bananas to feed their parrots and macaws, as they would for a human baby.

In other words: Sentimental attachments to animals are not at all an invention of modern Western decadence. Instead, Serpell argues, it is the

impulse to see something “strange, perverse or wasteful” about anthropomorphizing pets that is born out of modern Western society—specifically, the need to justify the mass exploitation and slaughter of other animals like cattle, pigs, and chickens. How can we treat some animals so lovingly as pets and others so cruelly as livestock? The “least painful solution” to this paradox, according to Serpell, is to denigrate the emotional relationship with pets.

In the long and broad view of human history, Serpell told me, there is nothing unusual about personifying animals or extending our most human instincts toward them. “I think it’s, in one sense, completely natural to do so,” he said. It is only human.

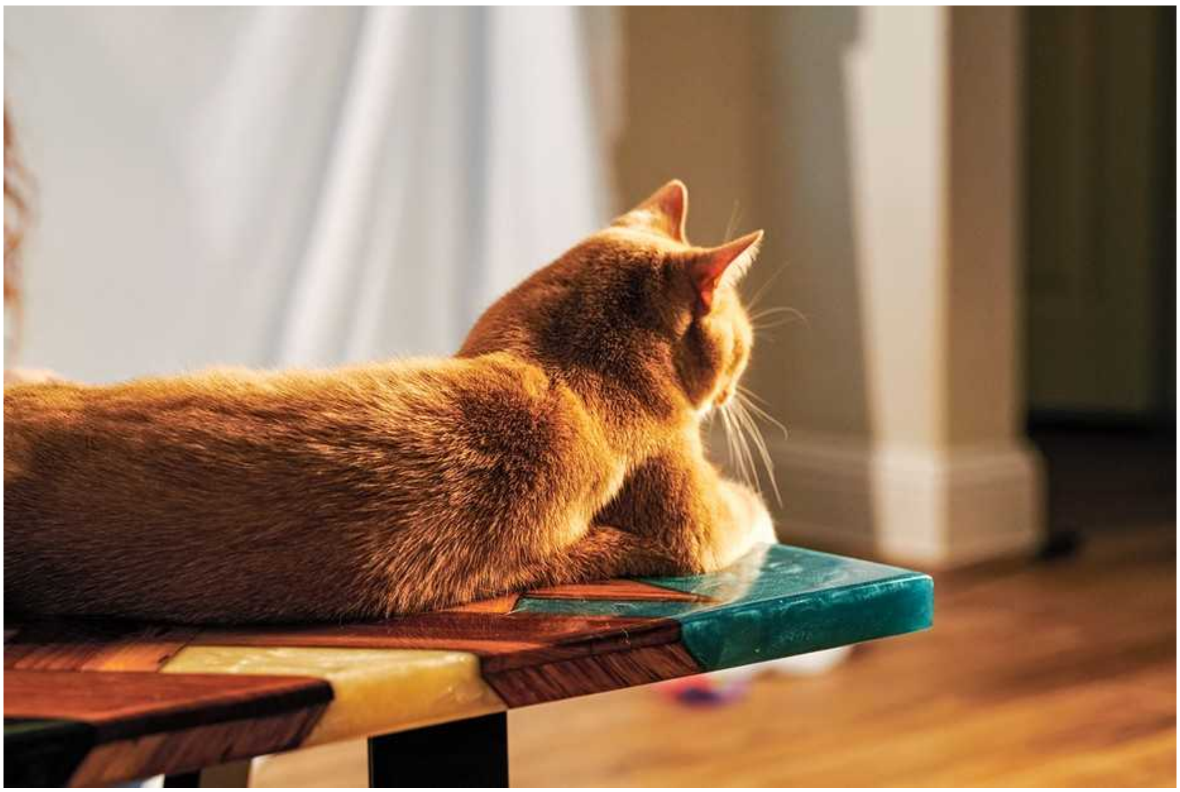
Over the centuries—and even since the 1980s, when Serpell was writing—the quantity of material affection one can shower on pets has gone up and up. A casual perusal of a pet store will turn up toys, beds, fountains, strollers, human-grade treats, snuffle mats, thunder jackets, teethers, playpens, vitamins, pet monitors, calming collars, toothbrushes, diapers, and pet-birthday gift sets. But it is in the life-and-death decisions of veterinary care that the question of how much money can buy becomes the most fraught.

Veterinarians, too, often find themselves struggling with how far to go for an ailing patient. In a recent study, 98.5 percent of the nearly 500 veterinarians in the U.S. who participated said pet owners had asked them to provide futile care for their dying animals. “They were a nearly daily feature of my life when I was an ICU vet and palliative-care vet,” says Lisa Moses, a veterinarian and bioethicist at Harvard and a co-author of the study. She regularly saw dogs with end-stage metastatic cancer whose owners wanted yet another round of chemo or cats with heart failure that were hospitalized and sedated, again and again, to have fluid temporarily removed from their lungs. “The staff are just beside themselves, because they don’t want to keep doing it to just buy them another couple of days.”

In times when he’s provided futile care, says Nathan Peterson, a veterinarian at Cornell and the lead author of the study, he has done it for the sake of the owner, not the pet. Advancements in medicine have opened up a gap

between what is possible to do for a pet and what might be best to do for them.

Attitudes about this are neither universal nor static. Robert Hardie, who performs kidney transplants at the University of Wisconsin, told me he was surprised at how different norms were in the U.K. when he practiced there back in the late ’90s. “People really love their pets, and most pets were actually insured”—so cost wasn’t a major concern. Still, some owners turned down straightforward procedures, where good recoveries were likely. “When it came to doing something like, say, ‘Well, we can fix this fracture; we can do this thing,’ the default was often, ‘Well, I wouldn’t want to put her through that,’” he said. “It’s just a cultural mindset.”



Sherlock, originally destined to be a lab cat, lounges at his home near Austin, Texas. (Caroline Tompkins for *The Atlantic*)

This question of how much to put a patient through is everywhere in human medicine as well, but Moses points out a fundamental difference: Vets are trained to view euthanasia as a humane way to prevent suffering. Doctors are not. And to vets, delaying euthanasia is seen as prolonging suffering.

“Veterinarians became veterinarians because they didn’t have tolerance for animal suffering,” she says. “We want to relieve it as part of our oath.” This constant moral distress, she believes, contributes to the extraordinary level of burnout in veterinary medicine. Turnover in the field is high, much higher than in human medicine. Suicide rates also are high: Female veterinarians are 3.5 times as likely to die by suicide as the general population; male vets are about twice as likely. So many people are now leaving the profession that some emergency animal hospitals have had to curtail their hours and turn away sick patients.

Read: The great veterinary shortage

It’s common, too, for vets to face owners who cannot afford a procedure. Many veterinary practices have been consolidated in recent years, Peterson says, and large corporate practices are more likely to have expensive equipment for procedures such as MRIs, laparoscopic surgery, and laser therapy. Whereas an owner might once have exhausted their options at a small family practice and gone home knowing they did everything they could, now their pet might be recommended for another scan, another test, another procedure—racking up more bills along the way. This does mean better medical care, but only if you can pay. It’s not unusual, vets told me, for distressed owners to lash out when they hear the costs.

This June, a Maine veterinary hospital found itself at the center of a firestorm after an upset owner went to the local news about her German-shepherd puppy’s $10,000 emergency surgery. She didn’t have the money for a 50 percent deposit, and she didn’t immediately qualify for a loan; she surrendered her dog to another owner to pay for the surgery. When the story aired, irate viewers swarmed the hospital’s Yelp page. They accused the vets of stealing a dog and of caring about money over animals’ lives. According to the hospital, angry callers jamming the phone lines blocked emergency calls from getting through. Threats to burn down the hospital and kill the staff came in by the hour. Multiple veterinary staffers around the country brought up this incident to me unprompted in conversations this summer. It unnerved them because they had all encountered similarly upset owners. “Their expectations are unrealistic sometimes,” said one vet in Rhode Island. “They want treatments without spending any money.”

Even in the U.S., a human ER wouldn't ask for a deposit before operating on a dying human. The sanctity of human life, which we universally accept, means human medicine has at least some safeguards to remove cost from the equation. Veterinary care is not like that. It isn't a right, but should it really be a pure consumer good? The answer might depend on what you think about the sanctity of pet life.

In school, Schmiedt told me, he had considered becoming a doctor, but he worried about the emotional toll. "I just didn't want to be the one that has to tell a mom that her daughter was dying," he said. "I didn't want that." So he became a vet, only to find out that telling owners their dog is dying is sometimes almost as painful. And telling them that the dog will die unless they cough up $5,000 can be especially so.

Pet insurance is on the rise in the U.S., and a couple of cat owners told me that their insurance company had actually paid for most of their cat's kidney transplant. One of these is Holly, a graduate student who has studied, ironically, inequalities in health care. (She asked that we not publish her last name for privacy reasons.) Her cat was diagnosed with kidney failure in the summer of 2021. When she first heard about the possibility of a transplant, her initial reaction was, "I don't have that kind of money lying around, so fuck no." Her dad has a blue-collar job and her mom is retired, so they weren't in a position to help. But then she remembered that her cat had pet insurance, which would cover 90 percent of the costs.

It took a heroic bureaucratic effort—familiar to anyone who has dealt with human-insurance companies—to go from vet to vet gathering all of the medical records and then arguing for coverage. The company didn't want to pay for any of the donor's surgery or care, which amounted to thousands of dollars. Holly couldn't afford it, but her cat obviously couldn't get the transplant without it. She pushed back. The company relented. "I would not have been able to save this cat had I not been a grad student who was intimately acquainted with health care," she told me.

"I am doing all of this for one cat," Holly said, "and people are still out there dying."

She couldn’t help but see her cat’s experience refracted through the inequality in human health care. Take even the specific example of kidney disease. Holly, who is Black, points out that kidney disease disproportionately affects Black Americans, including her own family. “It is the most bourgeois bullshit [that] I was able to get a kidney transplant for my cat,” she said, “and one of my family members passed because he couldn’t get a transplant.”

Holly was aware, when she took her cat to UGA, that she was unlike the other owners who typically fly their cats to Georgia for kidney transplants. She was aware of how fortunate her cat was. And she was aware that her cat was getting better medical care than many humans. “I am doing all of this for one cat,” she said, “and people are still out there dying.”

About five years ago, my husband and I decided to adopt a second cat to keep Pete company. One snowy morning, we drove to an adoption event in the suburbs, where we found that the number of prospective owners far outnumbered available cats. As we surveyed the human competition, a volunteer came over to hand us an intake form. It asked, among other things, the maximum amount we would spend on our new pet’s veterinary care. There is no wrong answer, the volunteer assured us, but I found myself unwilling to believe her. Write down too few zeros, the anxious voice inside my head whispered, and I’d out myself as heartless and miserly. Too many, and I’d be self-absorbed and extravagant.

We scribbled a hypothetical amount—maybe three zeros? I don’t quite remember but I guess it wasn’t a wrong answer, because they let us adopt a one-year-old cat we named Wiley. In the years since, I’ve wondered how I could possibly assign a monetary value to his—or Pete’s—continued presence in our lives. They are each in their own way essential, members of our household. Whereas Pete is cool and composed, if secretly affectionate once he warms up to you, Wiley is exuberant and clumsy. He will jump into a lap without calculating how far to leap, only to backslide, butt first, onto the floor. And he is always quick to pounce on a new toy, while Pete hangs back—not wanting to seem too eager, but also a bit jealous at having to wait his turn.

Watching our cats’ divergent personalities has helped shape the relationship between my husband and me. In the cats, we see our own foibles—how Pete’s reservation holds him back, how Wiley’s spirit gets him into trouble. There are times when we identify most with Pete, others with Wiley. We might just be projecting. We most definitely are. But the intimacy of the modern pet-human relationship means that they reflect an image of ourselves back to us.

Our cats have taught us about being human. I don’t know how much that is worth.

Editor’s Note: *After this article went to press, Banquo’s health continued to decline and Kassie Phebillo had him put down.*

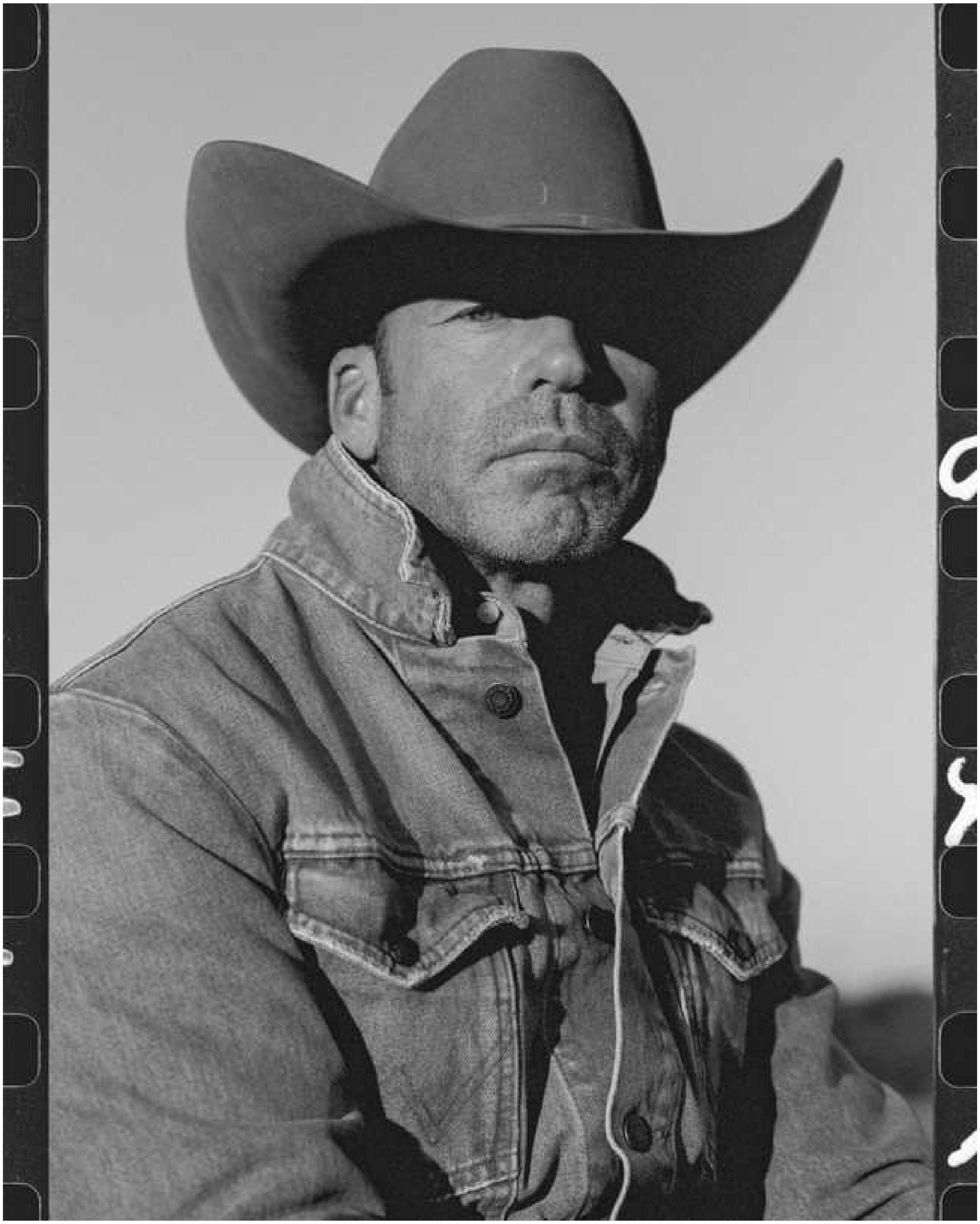
This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline “What Is a Cat’s Life Worth?” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/paying-for-pet-critical-care-cost-health-insurance/671896/

How Taylor Sheridan Created America’s Most Popular TV Show

Inside Paramount’s Yellowstone juggernaut

by Sridhar Pappu



“You’re not ready for this.”

It was early 2017, and Taylor Sheridan stood before Viacom executives describing *Yellowstone*, the television series he had conceived with the

producer John Linson. Sheridan had sold it to HBO some years before, only to see it languish, as so many projects do. But now it was close to finally being seen by the world, thanks to its savior and champion—a former child actor named David Glasser, who was then an executive with the Weinstein Company.

Glasser had seen the potential in the *Yellowstone* script, and in Sheridan, who had left behind his career as a character actor to write full-time. He'd helped Sheridan pry the show from HBO—taking *Yellowstone* to potential alternative suitors, from whom he'd gotten a series of polite, and not so polite, passes. Still, he had pressed on.

Finally, Glasser had attracted some interest. Viacom was preparing to launch a new cable channel, the Paramount Network, and it needed original shows. The executives wanted *Yellowstone*.

Sheridan, however, was threatening to derail the whole thing. When Glasser had asked him to come to Hollywood for the pitch meeting, the screenwriter had at first refused to leave his home in Park City, Utah. To coax him into attending the meeting, Glasser had to fly him there by private jet and promise him that he wouldn't have to spend the night in L.A., a city Sheridan had come to hate.

Glasser had finally gotten Sheridan in a room with Viacom executives. But what Sheridan delivered was less a pitch than a warning.

"It's going to cost $90–$100 million. You're going to be writing a check for horses that's $50–$75,000 a week." You really want to do this?

You will have no part in any of this, he told them—except for footing the bill. I will write and direct all the episodes of the show. There will be no writers' room. There will be no notes from studio executives. No one will see an outline.

"It's going to cost $90–$100 million," he says he told them. "You're going to be writing a check for horses that's $50–$75,000 a week." You really want to do this?

They were crazy to accept Sheridan's terms. But they were impressed by the cut Glasser had shown them of *Wind River*—the third movie Sheridan had written about the contemporary American frontier, following *Sicario* (2015) and *Hell or High Water* (2016), and the first one of them he had directed. And they liked the fact that Kevin Costner had signed on to play *Yellowstone*'s lead character, John Dutton.

What most attracted them was the script, which in its premise and sweep had echoes of *The Sopranos*, but with Western trappings. Dutton, the owner of the largest contiguous ranch in Montana, finds himself, like Tony Soprano, battling members of his own family as well as forces from the outside: Native Americans who want to build a casino on the land abutting his ranch; carpetbagging developers from California and New York who want to build golf courses and a ski resort and luxury housing and a new airport and even a whole new city. Dutton is watching his way of life slip away, his family along with it, and he is willing to do anything to hold on to both, no matter how bloody the cost. (A lot of people get murdered on *Yellowstone*.)

"This was one of the fundamental things I wanted to look at: When you have a kingdom, and you are the king, is there such a thing as morality?" Sheridan told me when we spoke last summer. "Because anyone trying to take your kingdom and remove you as king is going to replace your morality for theirs. So does morality factor into the defense of the kingdom? And what does that make the king? And at the end of the day, that's really what the show is about."

Sheridan knows something about kingdoms. At 52, he is now the heavy-handed sovereign of perhaps the most important one on television. The latest season of *Yellowstone* was the most-watched show on television last year besides NFL football. He helped Paramount's new streaming service, Paramount+, gain millions of new subscribers with multiple spin-offs of *Yellowstone*. A prequel, *1883*, came out late last year, and will soon be followed by two more: *1923*, which will launch in December, as well as *Bass Reeves*, which is slated for next year. Another *Yellowstone* spin-off is also due to premiere next year—*6666,* set at the legendary Four Sixes Ranch.

"He is, by far, the most important creator right now, arguably at any network," Matthew Belloni, a founding partner of the media and politics

website Puck, told me.

Within a year, Paramount's "Taylorverse," as some have come to call it, will include up to nine shows, most of which are written solely by Sheridan, who has proved to be as maniacal in his demand for complete artistic control as he threatened in that first pitch meeting. "It's tough to work for that guy," a *Yellowstone* veteran who knows Sheridan well told me, on the condition of anonymity for fear of speaking ill of someone who now has so much clout in the industry. "He drives everyone crazy."

Yet his scripts have drawn top-tier acting talent, including Dianne Wiest, Sam Elliott, Tom Hanks, Billy Bob Thornton, Zoe Saldaña, Kyle Chandler, and, most recently, Harrison Ford and Helen Mirren, who will star in *1923*. Yes: Han Solo and the Queen. On a ranch.

Oh, and Rocky, too. At the upfronts at Carnegie Hall in May, where television networks preview their shows to potential advertisers, Sylvester Stallone got onstage to explain how he came to star in Sheridan's *Tulsa King*, which premieres in mid-November.

"I couldn't believe it," Stallone said. "[Sheridan and I] were on the phone on Monday. By Wednesday/Thursday, we had a full script." Stallone plays a New York Mafia capo who, having served a 25-year prison sentence, gets sent to Oklahoma by his boss to set up a criminal syndicate. "I committed to it like *that*," Stallone said. "It was bold."

Four years after *Yellowstone*'s debut, Sheridan is now in a league with such creators as Shonda Rhimes and Dick Wolf. Only Sheridan might have the more arduous workload. "Most of the writer-producers at his level are essentially managers of a machine. He is actually writing a great deal of this output, which is unbelievable to me," Belloni said. Even the most exacting of Peak TV's auteurs—David Chase (creator of *The Sopranos*), Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*), Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*)—didn't insist on writing every episode themselves. Sheridan does all of this writing, by the way, while also playing a recurring character on *Yellowstone:* Travis Wheatley, a high-end horse trader and a rodeo performer. The role enables him to show off his formidable cowboying skills.



Sheridan on the set of *Yellowstone* during the shooting of Season 2, in 2018, near Darby, Montana (Emerson Miller / Paramount Network)

For all of his evident success, Sheridan and the universe he's created occupy a peculiar place on the American cultural landscape. Despite its high ratings, and Paramount's explicit attempts to position it as prestige television, the series doesn't get critical love, or even much critical attention. In January, when the show received a major nomination (for best ensemble in a drama series) from the Screen Actors Guild, some thought the show's breakthrough critical moment might finally have arrived. But when the Emmy finalists were announced, *Yellowstone* was shut out.

The Emmy blanking prompted a story in the *Daily Mail*, of all places, suggesting that *Yellowstone*—which the conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat has called "the most red-state show on television"—is just too "anti-woke" to win favor with Emmy voters. To date, *Yellowstone* has never won an Emmy. Its New York–media–focused competitor, *Succession*, which also debuted in June of 2018, has captured 48 nominations, winning 13 times. In September, it won Outstanding Drama Series for a second time.

Though very different from each other in setting and sensibility, the two shows are mirror images. Both have at their core an aging, raging, tyrannical patriarch trying to hold on to an empire (a ranch in one case, a media conglomerate in the other), threatened by a changing world he doesn't like or understand while trying, Lear-like, to fend off his own heirs, whose fecklessness, incompetence, addictions, and general psychopathology would seem to make them ill-suited for taking the reins of the enterprise. Both feature these patriarchs pitting their deeply flawed children against one another in sometimes vicious ways. Both are dark, edgy, and occasionally soapy. You can make a parlor game out of drawing parallels between the various characters.

Succession's highest-rated episode got only about a tenth of the viewers that a typical *Yellowstone* episode did last season, but it gets more respect. To be fair, the disparity in critical acclaim may be due in part to a difference in artistic quality. *Succession* has a crackle and a bite that, at its best, gives it the feel of a Restoration drama. *Yellowstone* is sappier and messier, owing as much to *Dallas* as to Sheridan's professed influences—Cormac McCarthy and the Coen brothers. At times *Yellowstone* betrays the strain on a lone writer who perhaps has been stretched too thin. (Sheridan told me he's never watched *Succession*.)

But the critical disparity is also accounted for by the cultural and political bubbles we've sorted ourselves into. *Succession*—depicting and aimed at coastal elites—makes noise on Twitter and at awards shows. *Yellowstone* is popular in the heartland and Sun Belt, where it's become not just a TV series but a lifestyle. In March, I attended the Cactus Reining Classic, an equestrian competition in Scottsdale, Arizona; some of Sheridan's horses were competing and he was serving as a commentator. The arena was saturated with *Yellowstone* paraphernalia. Attendees took selfies with cardboard cutouts of the characters. A *Yellowstone* store sold mugs, T-shirts, jewelry, and dinnerware adorned with the signature stylized *Y* that's the brand of the Yellowstone ranch. The literal one: The Duttons stamp it on their cattle, as well as on some of their cowboys.

Sheridan insists that *Yellowstone* is not a "red-state show." "They refer to it as 'the conservative show' or 'the Republican show' or 'the red-state *Game of Thrones*,'" he told me. "And I just sit back laughing. I'm like, 'Really?'

The show's talking about the displacement of Native Americans and the way Native American women were treated and about corporate greed and the gentrification of the West, and land-grabbing. That's a red-state show?"

Read: How Hollywood whitewashed the Old West

Sheridan is right that the show's politics are not easy to pin down. Yes, its red-state milieu—all those guns and horses and big, open vistas—along with its veneration of honest toil, cowboy masculinity, violence, and characters who have a general resistance to change may have drawn rural dads who fear, like John Dutton, the end of their own ways of life in a changing America.

But *Yellowstone* doesn't have an explicit ideology that maps onto a traditional red–blue spectrum. It's a mishmash of generally anti-capitalist, anti-modernist populism; pro-rancher libertarianism; conservative environmentalism (I know, today that sounds like an oxymoron, but it has sturdy Teddy Rooseveltian roots); and a sympathetic, pro–Native American revolt of the oppressed. The series isn't a sop to conservative values, or at least it's not only that. What Sheridan is up to is slyer, or maybe just more muddled.

Sheridan told me he aims to do "responsible storytelling," to depict the moral consequences of certain behaviors and decisions. He says he was strongly influenced by Clint Eastwood's 1992 film, *Unforgiven*, which "upended" the black-hat/white-hat conventions of the traditional Western. Eastwood "let the sheriff be a bully and the hero be this drunken, vicious killer." He "shattered the myth of the American Western," Sheridan said. "So when I stepped into that world, I wanted there to be real consequences. I wanted to never, ever shy away from, *This was the price*."

The biggest price—and this theme runs through much of Sheridan's work—is the one exacted by capitalism and the gentrifiers and financiers who snooker the good people who still work with their hands. Despite his professed admiration for Eastwood's revisionist Western, Sheridan subscribes artistically to something that looks like the old cowboy way. If his work has a higher moral plane, it's one governed by cowboy virtues:

honor, bravery, physical labor, respect for tradition, and a willingness to die—and kill—in defense of your family and your land.

Though now a rich screenwriter, Sheridan still lives a version of the cowboy life. When he was growing up, his family had a ranch outside Waco, Texas, where he learned to shoot and ride. Though the mythology of his cowboy roots has been embellished over time—his father was a cardiologist, the ranch a weekend home—he is a genuinely skilled horseman. He has won thousands of dollars in "cutting" competitions, and he produces a reality show, *The Last Cowboy*, in which men and women compete in horse reining. In 2021, he was inducted into the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame.

After what Sheridan has said was a difficult childhood—he spent a lot of time roaming the ranch in solitude—he dropped out of college at Texas State University and moved to Austin, where he did odd jobs like house-painting and landscape work. He has said a chance encounter with a talent scout in a mall provided a way into acting. A successful audition in Chicago eventually brought him to Los Angeles. Over time, he got bit parts on shows like *CSI*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Walker, Texas Ranger*. He was working, but his career didn't seem to be leading anywhere in particular. For a time, as he struggled, he lived in his car with his dog.

While Sheridan waited for his break, he started a business coaching other actors. Though he'd yet to win success himself, he found he was good at helping other actors hone their craft.

At 38—ancient for an actor—he earned a regular part as a deputy police chief on the FX network's *Sons of Anarchy*, a TV drama centered on a motorcycle gang. From the outside, this was the kind of life that so many of his peers—still working as bartenders and baristas—dreamed of. But after two seasons, he decided it wasn't sustainable. Yes, he was making more than $100,000 a year. But there were costs: an agent, a manager. By then he was married to his wife, Nicole, who was having a baby. When he asked the producers for a raise, they refused. So he decided he had to leave. Not just the show, but acting entirely.

Sheridan didn't know what to do, or where to go. He talked with a friend about moving to Wyoming, where he might lead camping trips on

horseback, put his cowboy skills to use. One of his coaching clients was the intense Canadian-born actor Hugh Dillon. The two began to talk about a show based on a company town decaying around its primary employer—the prison. Though Sheridan had never written a script, Dillon suggested that the two work on a pilot together.

Sheridan had read enough bad scripts to believe that he could do better. He knew that to get started, he had to have the screenwriting software program Final Draft. Nicole maxed out her credit card to buy it.

Taking the script out to would-be buyers served as a preview of Hollywood dealings to come. He got some offers, but they came with conditions, requested changes. And though Sheridan faced the very real prospect of not being able to pay his rent, he felt he couldn't live with those conditions.

"I'm putting the script in a desk for 10 years until I can make it the way I want to make it," he told Dillon. And he started writing a movie instead.

By conventional storytelling logic, *Sicario* shouldn't work. It's unwieldy, the plot a bit tough to follow. As Sheridan himself has said of the film, his first screenplay to become a movie, it's hard to know whom to root for. We're just as lost as Kate Macer, the FBI agent played by Emily Blunt, who is trying to avoid getting killed by the ostensible "good guys" in the shadow war between the U.S. government and Mexican drug cartels. Set along the El Paso–Juárez border, the movie is violent and, in its refusal to provide any redemption or uplift, existentially bleak. Its vision of America and its institutions is grim.

Sheridan was capturing a feeling—a changing mood in the land. The happy, self-satisfied glow of the early Obama years had faded. In 2015, before the complete Marvel-ization of the Cineplex, people would pay $15 to see a movie without a hero or *Top Gun*–style jingoism. *Sicario* made more than $80 million at the box office, and it established Sheridan as an exciting new voice in Hollywood.

But also a difficult one to work with. [On a recent podcast](), the producer Basil Iwanyk described what happened when he and Denis Villeneuve, the film's director, determined that the original ending Sheridan had written for *Sicario*

didn't work as well as it could. When they asked him to rewrite it, Sheridan refused. Yes, he was only a first-time screenwriter, but he was not going to write the ending they wanted. So the climax was rewritten by committee. Sheridan, Iwanyk explained, was furious.

From the November 1945 issue: Writers in Hollywood

Sheridan's next screenplay, which became the film *Hell or High Water*, captures as well as any movie the wreckage of the Great Recession and the human costs of an automated America. Written in less than three weeks, it is the story of two brothers trying to save their family ranch by robbing branches of the bank that's seeking to foreclose on it. (Saving family ranches is a recurring motif in his work; his own mother lost the Sheridan ranch after she overleveraged it.) It's Sheridan's best work to date.

Set in the faltering towns of West Texas, *Hell or High Water* is a modern Western in which both cops and robbers are hard-bitten men who act with good intentions. It's a dark but clever story of sacrifice and loss, and it earned four Oscar nominations, including Best Supporting Actor (for Jeff Bridges, who played a Texas Ranger on the verge of retirement) and Best Picture. Sheridan was nominated for Best Original Screenplay. The acclaim he received for *Hell or High Water*, and for *Wind River* after that, made it harder for studio executives to dictate his artistic choices or rewrite his endings—and easier for him to demand that everything be done his way.

That Sheridan—or anyone—survived *Yellowstone*'s first season is a miracle. He followed through on his promise to keep everyone out of his process. He wrote and directed every part of what he describes as a 10-hour movie. (Seldom does anyone in Sheridan's orbit call the work "television.") No outlines meant no structure to the creative operation. It also meant little sleep.

"We're getting scripts, like, three days before we shoot them," Luke Grimes, who plays John Dutton's dreamy youngest son, the retired Navy SEAL Kayce Dutton, told me. "None of us knew where this thing was going … I'd never been a part of something like that. But it just felt so alive and so fresh."

People who have worked closely with Sheridan for a while, perhaps having drunk too deeply from the Taylorjuice, will tell you about the “purity” of that first season. No one had to contend with the varying interpretations of multiple directors and writers, just Sheridan’s. After the first five episodes, which he completed before production started, he wrote whenever he could, disappearing sometimes for hours, then coming back with a script.

“It’s tough to work for that guy. He drives everyone crazy.”

A typical Sheridan script has little or no plot exposition. Sheridan said he likes “to come up with extremely simple plots, and then I can have—because I don’t have to explain a lot—really, really complex characters,” which he finds “much more entertaining and thought-provoking.”

On *Yellowstone*, no character is more complex than the brilliant, fearless, caustic, vicious, chain-smoking, hard-drinking Beth Dutton, John’s daughter, played with deadpan panache by Kelly Reilly. (At horse shows, you can buy T-shirts saying Don’t Make Me Go Beth Dutton on You.) Deeply traumatized and deeply loyal to her father, Beth is alternately nasty and endearing but, in her lacerating savagery, never not compelling.

When I talked with Reilly last summer—sitting on the back porch of the house that serves as the Dutton home in Montana, where she was filming Season 5—she told me that the Beth Dutton phenomenon is a tribute not to her acting but to the dialogue Sheridan writes for her. “She has these zingers and one-liners that people seem to love,” she said.

> **Waitress:** Care for a drink?
> **Beth Dutton:** Double Tito’s, three olives.
> **Waitress:** You mean a martini?
> **Beth:** Nope, martinis have vermouth and are enjoyed with friends. I don’t like vermouth, and these aren’t my friends.

(These are quite tame, as Beth’s lines go; most of her best ones are gloriously crude.)

Sheridan’s dialogue owes something to the novelist and screenwriter Larry McMurtry (*Lonesome Dove*, *The Last Picture Show*). McMurtry, Sheridan

told me, "doesn't waste words. You could add a lot of words to his dialogue and the dialogue still works, but you can't take any away. And that, to me, is the cornerstone of writing good dialogue. If you took one word out of the sentence, the sentence doesn't make sense."

> **Jamie Dutton:** Working with them is a deal with the devil, Dad. **John Dutton:** All the angels are gone, son. There's only devils left.

But the economy with which Sheridan writes isn't merely about artistic vision; it's also about artistic control. "It makes my point of view, the tone, what the scene is about, and what the sentence is about for an actor very, very clear. It becomes very difficult to misinterpret it or reinterpret it."



Kelly Reilly as *Yellowstone's* Beth Dutton; Tim McGraw, Sam Elliott, and Billy Bob Thornton on the set of *1883.* (Paramount Network)

However stripped down the scripts might be, Viacom executives were concerned that if Sheridan didn't share the workload he would drown. For Season 2, they gave him a writers' room. It didn't go well.

When the writers, who were mostly based in Los Angeles, came to the set, "Taylor refused to talk to them," according to the *Yellowstone* veteran who spoke with me on condition of anonymity. "He kept saying, 'It's weird to have other people write my characters.'" Sheridan told me that he mostly ignored the suggestions of the writers' room. He said that only the writers' assistant—whose job ordinarily consists of tasks like research, fact-checking, and proofreading—wrote good scenes; that's why he gave him a writer's credit. (IMDb lists multiple writers as contributors for Season 2.) In any case, for Season 3, the writers' room was gone.

Y*ellowstone* was far from an instant hit. When Chris McCarthy, a longtime Viacom executive, gained oversight of Paramount Network in late 2019, he had never seen the show. The second season had just aired, and he had plenty of reasons to cancel it. Its numbers were decent, not spectacular. It did well in rural areas and midsize metropolitan regions but bombed in the major markets. Its exorbitant production costs made it a candidate for the chopping block. But McCarthy saw potential. *Yellowstone*'s problem, McCarthy believed, was that it aired on Wednesdays in the summer. HBO and Showtime had long ago made Sunday evenings the showcase for high-quality television drama, the last citadel of appointment viewing. So McCarthy moved it to prestige night. When the numbers started to grow, in 2021, Paramount took the next step, moving it from summer to fall.

It worked. The Season 3 premiere earned 7.6 million viewers. Last year's Season 4 premiere almost doubled that figure; its 12.7 million viewers made it the most-watched premiere since the *Walking Dead* season opener in 2017.

But McCarthy needed still more from Sheridan. Before McCarthy came on board, Viacom had sold off the streaming rights to some of its assets in what amounted to a shortsighted view of the cord-cutting market. (This is why earlier seasons of *Yellowstone* belong to Comcast, which airs the show on its Peacock streaming service.)

In early 2021, ViacomCBS belatedly embraced the streaming revolution, rebranding its CBS All Access service as Paramount+. Having seen *Yellowstone* buoy Paramount's cable channel, McCarthy turned again to Sheridan to get the rechristened streaming service off the ground. Paramount had already green-lighted *Mayor of Kingstown*, the show that Sheridan had years ago co-created with Hugh Dillon. But it needed more programming, and needed it fast. Hence the decision to "double down, triple down on Taylor," as McCarthy put it, with *1883* and the parade of additional prequels and spin-offs that has followed.

With *1883*, Sheridan got everything he wanted. Every actor. (The series stars Sam Elliott and the husband-and-wife country-music stars Faith Hill and Tim McGraw, among others; Tom Hanks, Rita Wilson, and Billy Bob Thornton all appear in episodes.) Every historical detail. (The series used 30 real Conestoga wagons and 200 horses.) Every location. (The cast and crew

traveled in extreme heat and cold from Texas to Montana, and they shot one of the final scenes—a single one—in Oregon, so Elliott could deliver his final lines on a beach there.)

The story of how the Dutton family came to Montana, *1883* is an unsparing, even pitiless look at the immigrant experience on the Oregon Trail after the Civil War. There are drownings and scalpings and amputations without anesthesia—various major characters do not survive the season. Many of the actors told me it was one of the most grueling projects they'd ever worked on. "Everything was against us," the director Christina Alexandra Voros, who is part of Sheridan's inner circle, told me later. "Time was against us. Weather was against us. COVID was against us. It was sprawling to a degree that I don't think any of us truly understood."

In the final days of shooting, in January, the toll that *1883* had taken on the cast was evident. They were filming on land that Sheridan owns near his ranch in Weatherford, Texas, 40 miles outside Fort Worth. Worn out from months of fighting the elements, some of the actors were fighting themselves.

"Fuck me in the ass!" Hill yelled. She was sitting with her real-life husband discussing the fate of their fictional daughter, and struggling with her lines. She was exhausted. Everyone was.

"Baby," McGraw said sympathetically.

Later, during a quiet moment, Sam Elliott and I talked in a darkened corner of a soundstage. COVID protocols on set were strict, and a new variant was spreading, so his signature mustache was hidden behind a KN95 mask. He couldn't hide his distinctive laconic drawl, though, one of the qualities that have made him a sought-after commodity by directors of Westerns.

Before Sheridan came calling, Elliott hadn't been on a horse in years. He was done with the genre, and in fact he's been outspoken in his criticism of some recent Westerns—including *Yellowstone*, which he says he'd heard bad things about from friends in Montana. ("Taylor knows I haven't watched it," he told me.) Then he read the *1883* script, which Sheridan had written with

him in mind for the part of the widowed Union officer Shea Brennan. Elliott thought the voice-over narration was "fucking poetry." He was in.

Sheridan rekindled his enthusiasm for the Western. "I just think it's a great genre," Elliott told me. "So many classic struggles that I always think about: man against man. Man against himself. And man against the environment. You know what I mean?"

In 2021, Paramount gave Sheridan a multiyear development deal that will reportedly pay him $200 million.

At the moment, he's working on at least eight shows, which fall into two baskets. In the first are the programs he writes himself—*Yellowstone* and *1923* and *Mayor of Kingstown* and possibly *6666*, as well as *Lioness*, starring Zoe Saldaña, about a crew of female CIA operatives trying to bring down a terrorist organization. *Lioness* actually had a showrunner and a writers' room, but sources told *Variety* that after the room finished, the producers and showrunner, Thomas Brady, had an amicable parting of the ways concerning creative differences, and Sheridan took over. The other basket contains the shows he develops but doesn't write himself, like the *1883* spin-off *Bass Reeves*, which is the story of the African American lawman who some believe is the inspiration for The Lone Ranger, and the Stallone vehicle *Tulsa King*, for which Sheridan wrote the pilot—in a single sitting—before handing it off.



The Four Sixes Ranch, which appears in both *Yellowstone* and a spin-off, *6666* (Paramount Network)

Paramount's business has an awful lot riding on the work of Taylor Sheridan. So the company appears understandably concerned about alienating his base. When Kevin Costner wore an I'm for Liz Cheney T-shirt during the apostate Republican's doomed reelection fight, MAGA fans on Twitter called him a fake cowboy, a Hollywood elitist, and a hypocrite; a hostile column appeared in *National Review*. And when I asked Sheridan about something he'd said years ago about Donald Trump, it caused a disturbance in the Taylorverse.

I'd come across a Sheridan interview from 2017, when he was promoting *Wind River*, in which he'd said of then-President Trump: "Can we just impeach that motherfucker right now? Like what are we—I don't understand … It's just, it's so embarrassing." I was interested in how he thinks about politics in relation to his screenwriting, so I asked him about it. "I don't recall that," he said.

I noted that maybe he'd thought he was off-mic. "I had just wrapped a movie and I was in Cannes," he said. (He wasn't in Cannes.) "I was mad about everything. Twelve-hour press junkets with no food or water will do that to you."

I dropped it, and we moved on.

The next morning, a Sunday, agitated texts started coming in from the Paramount team. David Glasser, I was told, was upset. The publicists were upset. The higher-ups at Paramount were upset. Unless I promised to leave Sheridan's Trump quote out of this story, I was told, a trip I'd scheduled to visit the *Yellowstone* set in Montana was at risk of being canceled. (Ultimately, I made the trip.)

I'd also asked Sheridan about another political comment he'd made, to *Esquire* in 2018, in which he'd said that "white privilege" was a noxious concept that was off-putting to many Americans. "Here's the worst two words put together in the past ten years: *white privilege*," Sheridan had told the journalist Stephen Rodrick. "Oh, really? Help me, Mr. Harvard-fucking-Ph.D., convince the man who's losing his ranch, who can't afford his kid's college—he has no health care, he has no fucking clue what Obamacare is, he's never seen a social-security-fucking-office, his only concept of federal government is taxes. How do I convince that guy he's privileged? You won't do it." In that answer, it seemed to me, lies the populist political sensibility that infuses much of Sheridan's work.

This Sheridan was willing to discuss. What he'd meant with his white-privilege comment, Sheridan told me, was that "you should be mindful of not berating the subject you are trying to educate, and find a way for them to digest your point of view without turning them off to it."

Violence is shown to be a necessary evil, whether to defend your family or your land or the existing social order, or simply to keep the peace.

I thought back to a visit I'd made to Sheridan's sprawling Bosque Ranch in Texas earlier this year, when I'd talked with Jen Landon, who plays the delightfully wacky Yellowstone wrangler Teeter, about how fractured American television and film viewership has become. Landon told me she

knew a producer on *Hell or High Water* who had never watched *Yellowstone*. This was “somebody who would like to work with him again,” Landon said, and yet *Yellowstone* was somehow not on her cultural radar.

We were sitting in Nic’s Bar, run by Nicole Sheridan. It overlooks the arena at Bosque Ranch, which is used for horse and cattle shows. After “cowboy camp” training, the cast of *1883* would come to Nic’s Bar to blow off steam late into the night. One wall is filled with photos of Nicole with her friends. Because of the bar’s proximity to animals, it smells.

“There was such a need and a hunger for this show,” Landon said. “A demographic of people who I normally associate with not knowing how to open Netflix managed to find Paramount and watch this show because they needed it, because they couldn’t relate to anything else.”

Read: Escape from quarantine with a Western movie

But what, exactly, are they relating to? Much of the show revolves around the Yellowstone bunkhouse, the rowdy, spartan home of the wranglers, where discipline is kept by a hierarchy that is almost primate-like in its rigidity. The alpha male, the lead ranch hand Rip, establishes and maintains his stature by fighting. Throughout the series, violence of various kinds is shown to be a necessary evil, whether to defend your family or your land or the existing social order, or simply to keep the peace. Controlled violence (cowboys beating the crap out of each other under supervision) can be a release valve to prevent worse violence (cowboys killing each other unsupervised).

The character for whom Sheridan seems to have the greatest contempt is John Dutton’s son Jamie. Though he went off to Harvard Law at the behest of his father, who thought it would help him defend the ranch’s interest in court and in the Montana legislature, Jamie is seen by John Dutton as pathetically weak and untrustworthy, because he wears nice suits and fights his battles with words and arguments, not fists and guns. He achieves momentary redemption only when he’s sent, as punishment, to live as low man in the bunkhouse, shoveling manure and earning a more honest living for a while.

Sheridan would say that his series critiques John Dutton as much as it valorizes him—it gives him the Tony Soprano treatment by showing the failures and blowback, the regret and loneliness, that are the frequent consequences of his actions. And it’s true that as a protagonist, John is sometimes less sympathetic than simply odious. But watching him and Kayce and Beth and Rip mete out frontier justice can be uncomfortably satisfying, an atavistic thrill.



Sheridan, photographed at the Bosque Ranch in Fort Worth, Texas, in September 2022 (Bryan Schutmaat for *The Atlantic*)

Having built an audience in places where a “stand your ground” worldview holds sway, Paramount seems keen not to offend or alienate it. A bigger concern for Paramount than politics should probably be that its television future now rests so heavily on the workload it has put on one man. “I’m shooting over $1 billion worth of television shows,” Sheridan told me.

“That’s how much money they’ve trusted me with, and I have to go make more than that with the product I create. So yes, it’s a tremendous amount of responsibility … I’m aware of the opportunity, and so I do spread myself thin as a result.” He knows it’s not sustainable. But he says this is a “three-to-five-year thing, at best—at least as far as me writing, directing, editing, casting”—not something he could keep up for 10 or 15 years.

“I don’t know that I will ever have this creative freedom again,” he says. “Hopefully I can ride off into the sunset before something tanks.”

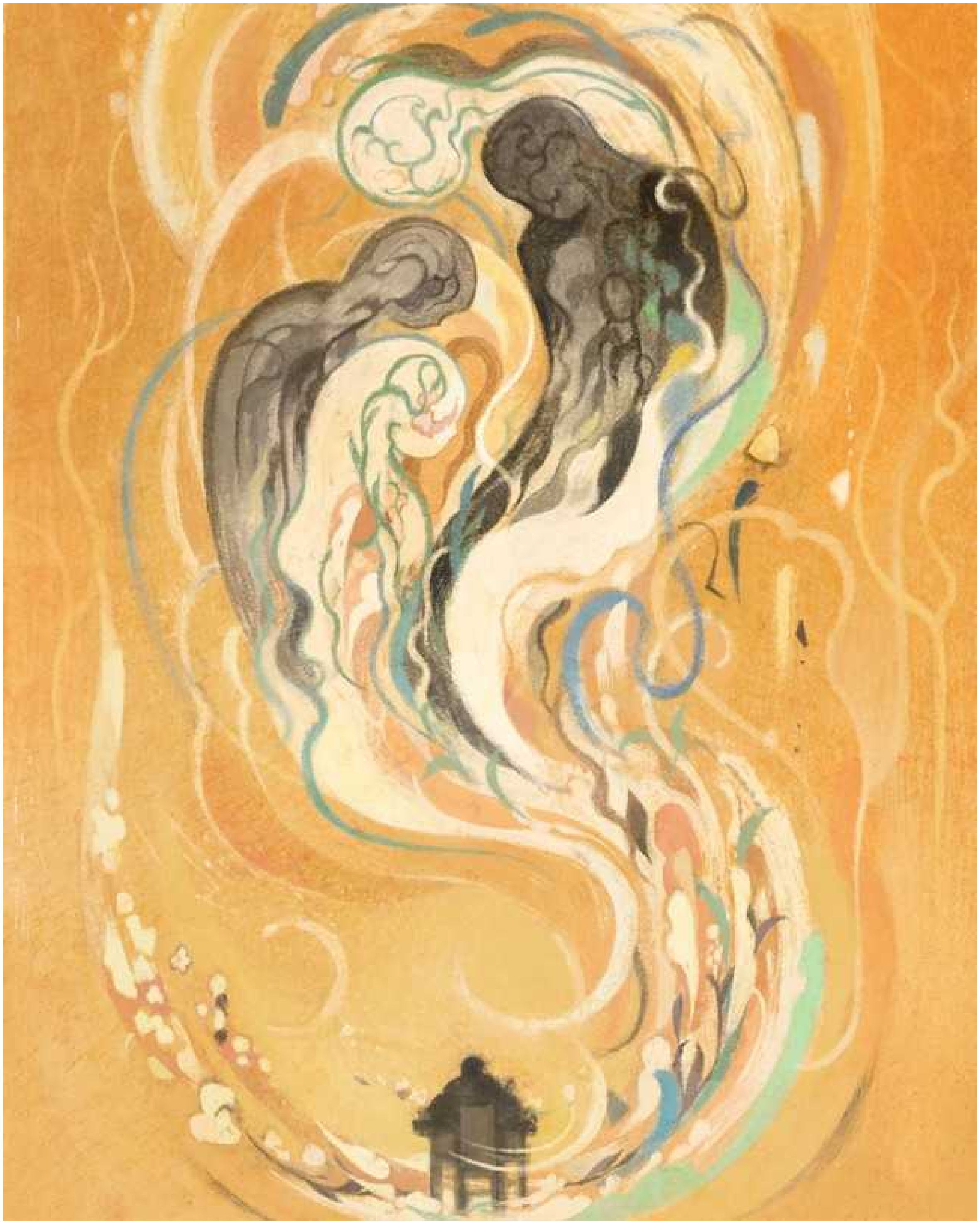
This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline “The Dark Vision of Taylor Sheridan.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/yellowstone-tv-series-taylor-sheridan/671897/

Where My Characters Come From

I don’t choose them; they choose me.

by Haruki Murakami



This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic*, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

I'm often asked if any characters in my novels are based on real people. On the whole, the answer is no. I've written a lot of novels, but only two or

three times have I intentionally, from the start, had a real person in mind when I created a character (in each case a secondary one). When I did, I was a bit nervous that a reader might detect that the character was modeled on somebody—especially if the person who did was the one the character was based on. But fortunately no one has ever caught me out, not even once. I might model a character on a real person, but I always carefully and diligently rework the character so people won't recognize the original. Probably the person himself doesn't either.

What happens more often is that people claim that the characters I have totally made up are based on real people. In some cases, people even swear that a certain character is based on them. Somerset Maugham was threatened with a lawsuit by a government official he'd never met, and never even heard of, who claimed that one of Maugham's characters was based on him. Maugham depicted an adulterous affair, which made the official feel his reputation was at risk.

Most of the time, the characters who appear in my novels naturally emerge from the flow of the story. I almost never decide in advance that I'll present a particular type of character. As I write, a kind of axis forms that makes possible the appearance of certain characters, and I go ahead and fit one detail after another into place, like iron scraps attaching to a magnet. And in this way an overall picture of a person materializes. Afterward I often think that certain details resemble those of a real person, but most of the process happens automatically. I think I almost unconsciously pull information and various fragments from the cabinets in my brain and then weave them together.

Read: Who you're reading when you read Haruki Murakami

I have my own name for this process: the Automatic Dwarfs. I've nearly always driven stick-shift cars, and the first time I drove an automatic, I had the feeling that dwarfs must be living inside the gearbox, each in charge of operating a separate gear. I also felt faintly anxious that someday those dwarfs, deciding they'd had enough of slaving away for someone else, would go on strike, and my car would suddenly stop working in the middle of the highway.

I know you'll laugh to hear me say this about the process of creating characters, but it's as if those Automatic Dwarfs living in my unconscious are, despite a bit of grumbling, somehow managing to work hard. All I do is diligently copy it down. Naturally, what I write isn't neatly organized, a ready-to-go novel, so later I rework it a number of times, changing its form. That rewriting is more conscious and logical. But the creation of the prototype is an unconscious and intuitive process. There's no choice involved, really. I have to do it like this, or my characters will turn out unnatural and dead. That's why, in the beginning stage of the process, I leave everything up to the Automatic Dwarfs.

Still, in the same way that you have to read a lot of books in order to write novels, to write about people you need to know a lot of them. By "know," I don't mean you have to really understand them deep down. All you need to do is glance at people's appearance, notice how they talk and act, what their special characteristics are. People you like; ones you're not so fond of; ones who, frankly, you dislike—it's important to observe people, as much as possible, without choosing whom to watch. What I mean is, if the only people you put in your novels are the kind you like, are interested in, or can easily understand, then your novels will ultimately lack a certain expansiveness. You want all sorts of different people, doing all sorts of different actions, and it's through that clash of differences that things get moving, propelling the story forward. So you shouldn't just avert your eyes when you decide you can't stomach somebody; instead, ask yourself, "What is it I don't like about them?" and "Why don't I like that?"

A long time ago—I think I was in my mid-30s—someone told me, "There are never any bad people in your novels." (Later I learned that Kurt Vonnegut was told the same thing by his father just before his father died.) I could see the point. Ever since then, I've consciously tried to include more negative characters, but at that stage, I was more inclined to create a private world—one that was harmonious—than to write large-scale, narrative-driven books. I had to build my own neat little realm as a shelter from the harsh realities of the larger world around me.

But as time has passed and I've matured (you might say) as a person and as a writer, I've ever so gradually been able to include more negative characters in the stories I write, characters who introduce an element of discord. As the

novelistic world I created took clearer shape and functioned fairly well, my next step was to make this world broader and deeper, and more dynamic than before. Doing that meant adding more variety to my characters and extending the scope of their actions. I keenly felt the need to do this.

One of the things I most enjoy about writing novels is the sense that I can become anybody I want to be.

By then, I'd experienced many things in my life, too. At age 30 I became a professional writer, with a public presence, and like it or not I had to face a lot of pressure. I don't naturally gravitate to the spotlight, but there were times when, reluctantly, I was forced to put myself there. Sometimes I had to do things that I didn't want to do, or was very disappointed when a person I was close to spoke out against me. Some people would praise me with words they didn't really feel, while others—pointlessly, as far as I could see—heaped ridicule on me. Still others spoke half-truths about me. I also went through experiences that I can only characterize as out of the ordinary.

Every time, I tried to observe in detail the way that the people involved looked and how they spoke and acted. *If I'm going to have to go through all this*, I figured, *I should at least get something useful out of it* (to get back what I put into it, you could say). Naturally, these experiences hurt me, even made me depressed sometimes, but now I feel they provided a lot of nourishment for me as a novelist. Of course, I had plenty of wonderful, enjoyable experiences as well, but for whatever reason, it's the unpleasant memories that remain, the ones I don't want to remember. Perhaps there's more to learn from them.

When I think about the novels I enjoy most, I realize that they have lots of fascinating supporting characters. The one that leaps to mind is Dostoyevsky's *Demons*. The novel is long but holds my interest to the end. One colorful, weird minor character after another appears, keeping me wondering, *Why this kind of person?* Dostoyevsky must have had a huge mental cabinet to work with.

The novels of Natsume Sōseki are also full of appealing characters. Even those who appear only briefly are vividly portrayed and unique. A line they utter, or an expression or action of theirs, will strangely linger in my mind.

What impresses me about Sōseki's fiction is that it contains hardly any makeshift characters, ones who are there because the author decided he needed that sort of person at that point. These are novels created not by the mind but rather through sensations and experience. Sōseki paid his dues in each and every line, and you feel a sort of peace as you read them.

One of the things I most enjoy about writing novels is the sense that I can become anybody I want to be. I started off writing novels in the first person, using the first-person male pronoun *boku*, and continued in the same vein for some 20 years, only occasionally writing short stories in the third person. Naturally this "I" didn't equal me, Haruki Murakami (just as Philip Marlowe isn't Raymond Chandler), and in each novel the image of the first-person male protagonist changes. But as I kept writing in the first person, the line between real-life me and my novels' protagonists inevitably blurred to a certain extent, both for me and for the reader.

This wasn't a problem at first, because creating and broadening a novelistic world by using a fictionalized version of "I" was my original aim, but over time I got the sense that I needed more. Especially as my novels grew longer, using only the first-person narrative felt confining and stifling. In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985), I used two versions of "I" (using the pronouns *boku* and the more formal *watashi*, in alternating chapters), which I think was an attempt to break through the functional limits of first-person narration.

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle (published in Japan in three volumes in 1994 and 1995) was the last novel I wrote solely in the first person, until *Killing Commendatore* two decades later. Throughout that earlier, very long novel, I couldn't make do with just the "I" viewpoint, so I introduced a number of narrative techniques, such as other people's stories and long letters. Even with all of that, though, I felt I couldn't take first-person narration any further—so in my novel *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), the chapters about the boy Kafka were written in the usual "I," but the remaining chapters were in the third person. Sort of a compromise, you might say, but even just introducing the third-person voice in half the book opened up my novelistic world considerably. I felt, on a technical level, much freer than when I wrote *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

The short-story collection *Tokyo Kitanshu* (2005) and the medium-length novel *After Dark* (2004) were almost exclusively in the third person. It was as though I was making sure in these formats that I could do a solid job in this new narrative mode—like taking a sports car you just bought out for a spin on a mountain road to see what it can do. Two decades after my debut, I was ready to move on from the first person.

Why did it take so long to change the voice I wrote in? Even I don't know the exact reason. I can say that my body and psyche had grown completely used to the process of writing novels with an "I" narrator, so it took some time to make the switch. For me it was not simply a departure from first-person narrative but close to a fundamental transformation in my standpoint as a writer. And I'm the type of person who needs time to change the way I do things. For years I couldn't give actual names to my characters. Nicknames like "the Rat" or "J" were fine, but I basically used characters without names, and wrote in first person. Why couldn't I give them actual names? I don't know the answer. All I can say is that I felt embarrassed about assigning people names. I felt that somebody like me endowing others (even characters I made up) with names seemed kind of phony. Maybe in the beginning I felt embarrassed, too, by the whole act of writing novels. It was like laying my naked heart out for everyone to see.

Read: The mystery of Murakami

I was finally able to give the main characters names starting with the novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987). Until then, I'd imposed a pretty restricted, roundabout system on myself, but at the time it didn't bother me much. I just thought, *That's how it is*. But as my novels became longer and more complex, I started to feel the inconvenience. If you have a lot of characters and they don't have names, it can cause all kinds of confusion. So I resigned myself to it and made the decision, as I was writing *Norwegian Wood*, that I would name the characters. I closed my eyes and steeled myself, and after that, giving my characters names wasn't all that hard. Nowadays I'm able to easily come up with them. *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2013) even has a character's name in the title. With *1Q84* (2009–10), the story really started to take off when I came up with the name Aomame for the female protagonist. In that sense, names have become an important element in my writing.

Every time I write a new novel, I tell myself, *Okay, here is what I'm going to try to accomplish*, and I set concrete goals for myself—for the most part visible, technical types of goals. I enjoy writing like that. As I clear a new hurdle and accomplish something different, I get a real sense that I've grown, even if only a little, as a writer. It's like climbing, step-by-step, up a ladder. The wonderful thing about being a novelist is that even in your 50s and 60s, that kind of growth and innovation is possible. There's no age limit. The same wouldn't hold true for an athlete.

As I began using third person, increasing the number of characters, and giving them names, the possibilities for my novels widened. I could include all types and shades of people with all sorts of opinions and worldviews, and depict the diverse intertwining among them. And what's most wonderful of all is that I can become practically anyone I want. Even when I was writing in the first person I had that feeling, but with the third person the choices are far greater.

When I write in the first person, I usually take the protagonist (or narrator) as myself in a broad sense. This isn't the real me, as I've said, but change the situation and circumstances and it might be. By branching out, I am able to divide myself. And by dividing myself and throwing myself into the narrative, I am able to verify who I am, and identify the point of contact between myself and others, or between myself and the world. In the beginning that way of writing really suited me. And most of the novels I loved were also written in the first person.

Characters who are—in a literary sense—alive will eventually break free of the writer's control and begin to act independently.

For instance, *The Great Gatsby*: The hero of the novel is Jay Gatsby, but the first-person narrator is the young man Nick Carraway. Through the subtle interplay between Nick and Gatsby, and through dramatic developments in the story, Fitzgerald is actually narrating the truth about himself. That perspective lends depth to the story. However, the fact that the story is narrated from Nick's viewpoint imposes certain constraints on the novel. It's difficult for the story to reflect things that happen beyond where Nick can perceive them. Fitzgerald mobilized other novelistic techniques, fascinating in and of themselves, to skillfully overcome those limitations. But even

those technical devices have their own limitations. And in fact, Fitzgerald never again wrote a novel structured like *The Great Gatsby*.

J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, too, is very artfully written, an outstanding first-person novel, but he likewise never wrote another novel in this style. My guess is that both authors were afraid that the constraints of that structure might mean they'd wind up writing essentially the same novel all over again. And I think their decision was probably the correct one.

With series, like Raymond Chandler's Marlowe novels, the narrowness of these limitations can be employed to—conversely—lend a kind of intimate predictability (my early "Rat" stories perhaps had a touch of this). But with many stand-alone novels, the restrictive wall that the first-person narration constructs can stifle the writer. Which is exactly why I tried, from many angles, to shake up that narrative mode in order to carve out new territory.

When, in *Kafka on the Shore*, I introduced third-person narrative in half of the story, I found a real relief in writing the story that paralleled Kafka's, about the odd old man Nakata and Hoshino, the somewhat uncouth young truck driver. In writing this section, I was dividing myself in a new way so that I could project myself onto others—more precisely, so that I could entrust others with my divided self. And as a result, the narrative could intricately divide and open out in all sorts of directions.

I can hear people saying, "If that's true, then you should have switched to third person long ago—then you would have improved much faster," but I couldn't work things out that simply. Personality-wise I'm not that adaptable, and changing my novelistic standpoint involved making a major structural change in my work. To support this transformation, I needed to acquire some solid novelistic techniques and fundamental physical stamina, which is why I made the shift gradually, in stages, seeing how it went. At any rate, by the early 2000s, when I'd mastered a new vehicle and could step into uncharted territory in my novels, I felt liberated, as if a wall that had been there had suddenly disappeared.

Read: The personality test in your closet

The novelist has to put characters in his novel who feel real and are compelling and speak and act in ways that are a bit unpredictable. A novel with characters who only say and do predictable things isn't going to attract many readers. Naturally there will be people who feel that novels in which ordinary characters do ordinary things are the really outstanding ones, but (and this is, after all, just my personal preference) I can't get interested in those kinds of books.

Beyond being real, compelling, and somewhat unpredictable, I think what's even more important is how far a novel's characters advance the story. Of course, the writer creates the characters, but characters who are—in a literary sense—alive will eventually break free of the writer's control and begin to act independently. I'm not the only fiction writer who feels this way. In fact, unless that occurs, writing the novel becomes a strained and painful process. When a novel is on the right track, the characters take on a life of their own, the story moves forward by itself, and the novelist ends up in a very happy situation, just writing down what he sees happening in front of him. And sometimes a character takes the novelist by the hand, leading the way to an unexpected destination.

I'll cite an example from a novel that I assumed would be only about 60 pages long in Japanese manuscript format—*Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, which features a character named Sara Kimoto. To sum up the story line, Tsukuru Tazaki, the main character, had four really good friends from high school in Nagoya who suddenly told him they didn't want to see or hear from him ever again. They didn't give a reason. He completed college in Tokyo, got a job at a railway company, and is 36 in the present time of the story. His best friends cutting him off has left him deeply wounded. But he hides this pain and lives a peaceful, everyday life. His work goes well, he gets along with the people around him, and he's had several girlfriends along the way, though he hasn't formed deep attachments to any of them. At this point he meets Sara, who is two years older than he is, and they start seeing each other.

On a whim he tells Sara about his four high-school friends. Sara ponders this, then says he has to go back to Nagoya to find out what happened 16 years earlier to cause this rift: "Not to see what you want to see, but what you *must* see."

To be honest, until she said that, the idea that Tsukuru needed to go back to see his four friends was the furthest thought from my mind. I'd been planning to write a fairly short story in which Tsukuru lives a quiet, mysterious life, never knowing why he'd been rejected. But once she said that (and I merely wrote down what she said to him), I had to make Tsukuru go to Nagoya and, in the end, send him all the way to Finland. And I needed to then explore those four characters, Tsukuru's former friends, all over again to show what sort of people they were. And give details of the lives they'd led up to that point.

In almost an instant, the words that Sara spoke totally changed the story's direction, nature, scope, and structure. This was a complete surprise to me. If you think about it, she wasn't saying that to the protagonist, so much as to me. "You have to write more about this," she was saying. "You've stepped into that realm, and you've acquired enough strength to do that." So Sara was, again, perhaps a reflection of my alter ego, one aspect of my consciousness telling me not to stop at the place where I'd intended. In that sense, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* holds no small significance for me. On a formal level, it's a realistic novel, yet I find that all sorts of intricate, metaphorical things are going on below the surface.

The characters in my novels urge me—the writer—to forge ahead. I felt this keenly when I was writing the words and actions of Aomame in *1Q84*. It was as if she were forcibly enlarging something inside me. Looking back, I'm struck that most of the time it's female characters, not male characters, who lead me and spur me on. Why that is, I have no idea.

What I want to say is that while the novelist is creating a novel, he is simultaneously being created by the novel.

I'm sometimes asked, "Why don't you write novels with characters the same age as you?" I'm well beyond middle age now, so the question really is, *Why don't you write about the lives of older people?* But one thing I don't understand is why it is necessary that a writer write about people his own age. Why is that a natural job? As I said before, one of the things I enjoy most about writing novels is being able to become anyone I want. Why should I give up such a wonderful right?

When I wrote *Kafka on the Shore*, I was a little past 50, yet I made the main character a 15-year-old boy. And all the time I was writing, I felt like I was a 15-year-old. Of course these weren't the feelings a present-day 15-year-old boy would have. Instead, I transferred the feelings I had back when I was 15 into a fictional "present." Still, as I wrote the novel, I was able to vividly relive, almost in their original form, the air I actually breathed at age 15, the light I actually saw. Through the power of writing, I could draw out sensations and feelings that had long lain hidden deep within. It was a truly wonderful experience. Perhaps the sort of sensation only a novelist can taste.

But just me enjoying this by myself will not create a literary work. It has to be put into a form that lets readers share the pleasure. Which is why I included the character Nakata, who is in his 60s. Nakata was in a sense my alter ego, a projection of me. And with Kafka and Nakata acting in parallel and in response to each other, the novel acquired a healthy balance. At least I felt that way as I was writing—and I feel that way even now.

Maybe someday I will write a novel with a protagonist my own age, but at this point I don't feel it's absolutely necessary. What pops up first for me is the idea for a novel. Then the story naturally, spontaneously reaches out from the idea. As I said in the beginning, it's the story itself that decides what sort of characters will appear. As the writer, I merely follow directions as a faithful scribe.

I might, at one time, become a 20-year-old lesbian. Another time I'll be a 30-year-old unemployed househusband. I put my feet into the shoes I'm given, make my feet fit those shoes, and then start to act. That's all it is. I don't make the shoes fit my feet. This is not something you can do in reality, but if you toil for years as a novelist, you'll find you're able to accomplish it because the enterprise is imaginary. And being imaginary, it's like things that take place in dreams. In dreams—whether ones you have while asleep or ones you have while awake—you have hardly any choice about what happens. Basically I go with the flow. And as long as I'm following that flow, I can freely do all sorts of things that are hardly possible. This is indeed one of the main joys of writing novels.

That's how I want to reply every time I'm asked, "Why don't you write novels with characters the same age as you?" But the explanation is too

long, and I doubt people would easily get it, so I always give a suitably vague answer. I smile and say something like, “Good question. Maybe someday I’ll do just that.” And the truth is, it’s extremely difficult to observe yourself, objectively and accurately, as you are now. Maybe that’s precisely why I wear all kinds of shoes that aren’t mine. Doing that, I’m able to discover myself in a more comprehensive way, much like triangulating a location.

There still seems so much I need to learn about the characters in my novels. At the same time, there seems to be so much I need to learn *from* the characters in my novels. In the future, I want my fiction to bring to life all kinds of weird and colorful characters. Whenever I begin writing a new novel, I get excited, wondering what kinds of people I’m going to meet next.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline “Where My Characters Come From.” It is excerpted from Novelist as a Vocation*, translated by Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen, to be published in November by Knopf.*

When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/haruki-murakami-book-novelist-as-a-vocation/671845/

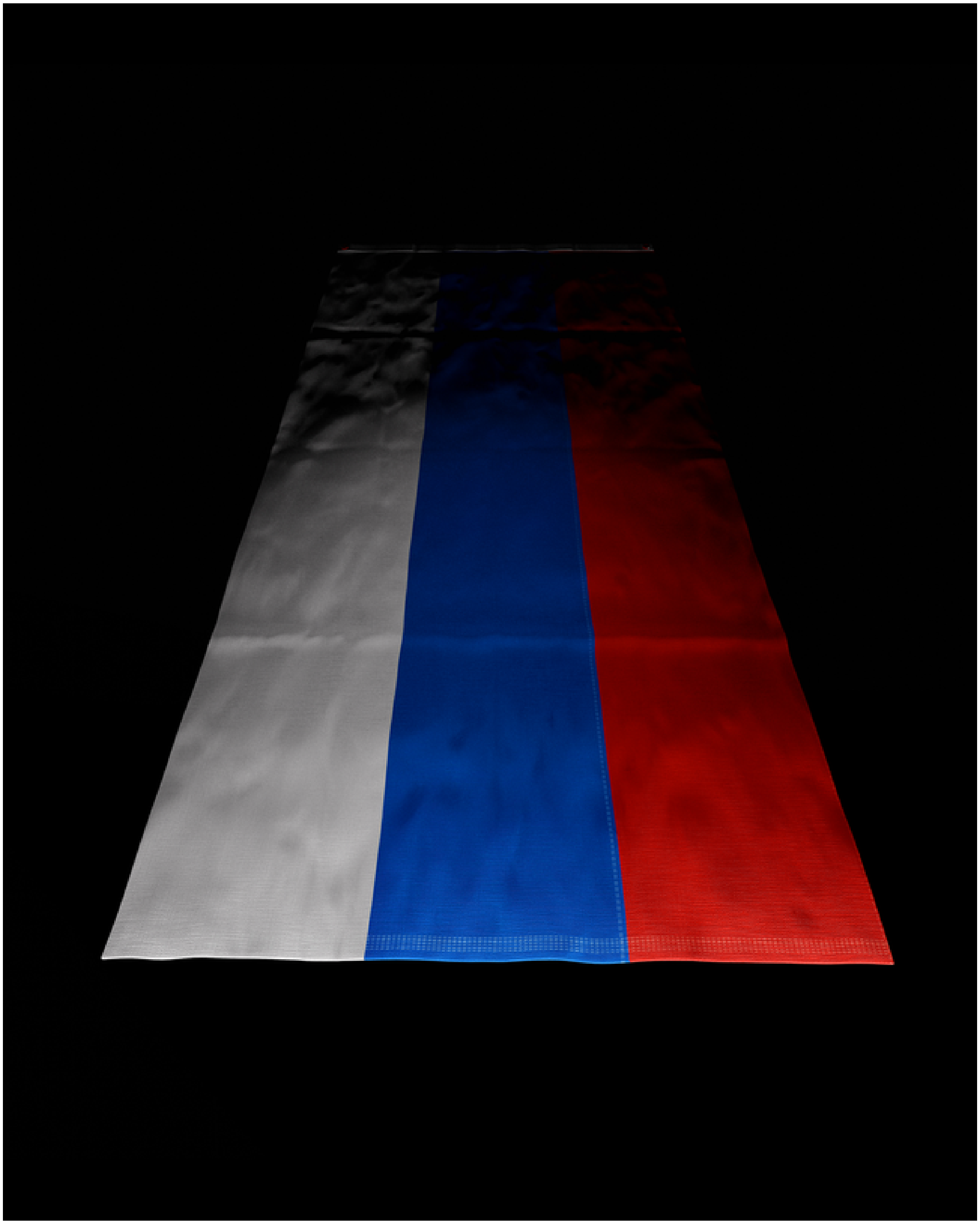
Dispatches

- **The Russian Empire Must Die**
- **The Petulant King**

The Russian Empire Must Die

A better future requires Putin's defeat—and the end to imperial aspirations.

by Anne Applebaum



During the quarter century of its formal existence, the Moscow School of Civic Education did not have a campus, a syllabus, or professors. The school instead ran seminars for politicians and journalists, led by other politicians and journalists, from Russia and around the world. It operated out of the

Moscow apartment of its founders, Lena Nemirovskaya and Yuri Senokosov. They had met in the 1970s while working on a Soviet philosophy journal, and shared a hatred of the violent, arbitrary politics that had shaped most of their lives. Nemirovskaya's father was a Gulag prisoner. Senokosov once told me he could not eat Russian black bread, because the taste reminded him of the poverty and tragedy of his Soviet childhood.

Both also believed that Russia could change. Maybe not change very much, maybe not very dramatically, but change nevertheless. Nemirovskaya once told me that her great ambition was just to make Russia "a little bit more civilized" through the exposure of people to new ideas. Their school, an extension of conversations held in their kitchen, was designed to achieve that single, nonrevolutionary goal.

For a long time it flourished. From 1992 to 2021, Nemirovskaya reckons, more than 30,000 people—parliamentarians, city-council members, businesspeople, journalists—attended their seminars around the country on law, elections, and media. British editors, Polish ministers, and American governors came to speak; they got financial support from an equally wide range of European, American, and Russian foundations and philanthropists. I attended perhaps a dozen seminars, mostly to speak about journalism.

But the school remained a Russian organization, built by Russians, for Russians. The topics were chosen because they interested Russians and later because they interested the Georgians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians who attended some seminars too. I remember a particularly boring (to me) seminar on federalism in Scandinavia that the participants found fascinating because they hadn't ever pondered, in their highly centralized societies, the various relationships between regional and national governments that could theoretically exist.

At the time, this project did not feel naive, idealistic, or radical, let alone seditious. Even during the first decade of Vladimir Putin's presidency, democratic politics were restricted but legal in Russia; opposition views were tolerated, as long as they didn't attract too much popular support; and there were many endeavors to organize discussions, training sessions, and lectures on democracy and the rule of law. Nemirovskaya told me that it never occurred to her that she was creating a "dissident" organization. On

the contrary, her efforts were meant to support exactly the kind of transformation that people in power in Russia in the '90s said they wanted. But slowly, those people were pushed out, or changed their mind. Officers of the FSB, the Russian secret police, began showing up at the seminars and asking questions. Negative articles about the school appeared in the Russian press. Finally, the state designated the school as a "foreign agent" and decreed that it had to advertise itself as such.

Anne Applebaum: Fear of nuclear war has warped the West's Ukraine strategy

In 2021, the school was closed. Nemirovskaya and Senokosov sold their apartment and moved to Riga, Latvia, where they still run seminars, only now for exiles. Many of their friends, colleagues, and former students trickled out of the country too. In the spring of 2022, following the invasion of Ukraine, that trickle became a wave. Tens of thousands of Russian journalists, activists, lawyers, and artists left the country, bringing with them whatever remained of independent media, publishing, culture, and the arts. Among them were many people who might have once attended a seminar on local government at the Moscow School of Civic Education.

That moment felt, to many inside and outside Russia, like the end of the story. But it wasn't—because stories like this one never end.

Ideas move across time and space, sometimes in unexpected ways. The notion that a country should be different—differently ruled, differently organized—can come from old books, from foreign travel, or just from its citizens' imaginations. At the height of the Russian empire, in the 19th century, under the rule of some of the most ponderous autocrats of their time, a plethora of reform movements flowered: social democrats, peasant reformers, advocates of constitutions and parliaments. Even some of the people born into the Russian imperial elite came to think differently from others in their social class. Leo Tolstoy evolved into a world-famous advocate of pacifism. The father of the writer Vladimir Nabokov made fiery public speeches in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution, edited a liberal newspaper, and spent time in prison. His son later remembered how, on the evenings when his father was holding his political meetings, "the hall

would house an accumulation of greatcoats and overshoes," and guests would talk well into the night.

The state pushed back against people who thought differently, even then. Mikhail Zygar, a Russian author and the founding editor of an independent television station called TV Rain, has written a book, *The Empire Must Die*, that, among other things, tells the story of the independent thinkers forced out of Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, some of whom came back to reshape it during the revolution. This was a moment when "the number of Russian political émigrés becomes so great that there is talk of the emergence of an alternative Russian civil society," he writes. "The Russian diaspora is no longer a branch of Russia; it is no longer clear which is the branch and which the trunk."

Most suffered from one major blind spot: Neither then nor later did most Russian liberals understand that the imperial project itself was the source of Russian autocracy. The White Russian armies lost to the Bolsheviks in part because they would not join forces in 1918–20 with newly independent Poland or would-be independent Ukraine. Democratic ideas did not triumph in either the branch or the trunk in the years that followed the Russian Revolution, partly because the state needed to use so much violence to keep Ukraine, Georgia, and the other republics inside the Soviet Union.

Still, even the decades of fear and poverty that followed the Russian Revolution did not eliminate the belief that another kind of state was possible. New generations of thinkers kept emerging out of the Soviet gloom. Some of them would help start the modern human-rights movement. Others, like the founders and students of the Moscow School of Civic Education, would try to create an alternative Russia in the years following the Soviet Union's collapse.

They lost, of course, to yet another dictator who is using an imperial war to eliminate his enemies and spread fear across Russia. Yet even now, even as the majority of Russians remain silent, even as they are cowed by propaganda or swayed by nationalist slogans, more than 17,000 Russians inside the country have protested against both the regime and their apathetic countrymen, have opposed Russian imperialism, and have been detained or imprisoned as a result. A few are well-known politicians who could have left

long ago, among them Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilya Yashin. The opposition politician Alexei Navalny was imprisoned in January 2021; he has been kept in isolation, but at a court hearing on September 21 nevertheless denounced the "criminal" war and accused Putin of wanting to "smear hundreds of thousands of people in this blood." On September 30 he published an essay, smuggled out of his cell, that imagined a post-Putin Russia and called for the replacement of Russia's current presidential system, which has now collapsed into full autocracy, with a parliamentary republic. Instead of posing as a new savior for the empire, he is calling for a different kind of Russia altogether.

Outside the country, hundreds of thousands of ordinary Russians are beginning to understand how closely the empire and the autocracy are linked. Some of the new exiles have given up on politics altogether, and many are just dodging the draft. But a large cohort oppose the war from abroad, through Russian-language websites that report on the war and try to get information to Russians in Russia. TV Rain, shut down by the government in March, is up and running again, online, based in Riga. Navalny's team, the remnants of his large national organization, is making videos that have millions of viewers on YouTube, which can still be accessed in Russia.

From the June 2022 issue: Ukraine and the words that lead to mass murder

A panoply of groups and people wants to keep a different idea of Russia alive, to create an "alternative civil society" outside Russia, not unlike the early-20th-century version described by Zygar, who is now in exile himself. Garry Kasparov—the former world chess champion who turned to democratic politics, helped organize street demonstrations in Moscow in the 2000s, and is now persona non grata in the country where he was once a hero—recently told me that he hopes to build a kind of "virtual South Korea," an opposition-in-exile that stands in contrast to a Russia that more and more resembles North Korea. One of Kasparov's projects, the Free Russia Forum, regularly brings together the various, sometimes squabbling branches of the Russian community outside Russia.

In at least one respect, all of these 21st-century exiles are unlike their 20th-century predecessors: They remain abroad, or in jail, because of a terrible

war of imperial conquest. Many therefore oppose not just the regime, but the empire; for the first time, some argue that it is not just the regime that should change, but the definition of the nation. Kasparov is one of many who argue that only military defeat can bring political change. He now believes that democracy will be possible only "when Crimea is liberated and the Ukrainian flag is flying over Sevastopol."

That idea—that there could be a different Russia, a Russia that is a nation-state and not an empire—does not carry much weight in Ukraine right now. On the contrary, many Ukrainians consider the Russian democratic opposition just as culpable, just as imperialist, and just as responsible for the war as non-dissidents. Certainly it is true that not all of the people who have been called "Russian liberals" in the past were against the empire or opposed to Putin. Some are technocrats who argued for a Pinochet-style dictatorship, or socialites whose "liberalism" was conveyed through photographs of European vacation spots posted on Instagram. The Ukrainian journalist Olga Tokariuk recently argued on Twitter that "even Russian 'liberals' repeatedly expressed imperialistic ideas re foreign policy and Ukraine. There is tolerance to war and aversion to democracy." Many ask, *Where are the mass protests of Russians in London or Tbilisi? Why aren't the thousands of exiles, not just the few who write for websites, making their voices heard?*

From the October 2022 issue: Anne Applebaum on a Belarusian volunteer regiment fighting for Ukraine

The argument that there are no "good Russians" does have a deep emotional logic, and a political logic too, and not only for Ukrainians. After all, Russian liberals have failed before. They failed in the 1900s, they failed in the 2000s, and they are failing now. They failed to stop Putin, failed to prevent this catastrophe from unfolding. Some of them failed, at least until recently, to understand how Russian imperialism has fed and nurtured Russian autocracy—to understand why, as the title of Zygar's book proclaimed, the empire must die. You can hear the anger at this failure in the changed tone of the speeches of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. On the eve of the war, Zelensky addressed Russians, in Russian, calling on them to prevent what was about to happen: "Do Russians want the war?" he asked rhetorically. "The answer depends only on you, citizens of the Russian Federation." But because they did not stop anything, Zelensky more recently

joined others to advocate a ban on visas for Russians to Europe, on the grounds that Russians should "live in their own world until they change their philosophy." After Putin announced his mobilization drive in September, Zelensky was even more explicit. Russians should not leave their country to escape the draft, but should "fight on your streets for your freedom," he told them. The Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko has also argued that the Russians who left Russia most recently are not fleeing war, just the draft: "If only these hundreds of thousands [of] people who flee mobilization stood up against the war inside Russia, the war would be over. Cowards."

There isn't really any way to oppose this logic. Of course Russians should have fought, and should fight. But it's important to remember, again, that a few of them have, and a few of them always will. Maybe this group needs a new name—they are not "Russian liberals," but "anti-empire Russians" or "pro-democracy Russians" or "pro-freedom Russians." Some have come to this conclusion through careful analysis, some instinctively. In recent conversations, Russians have mentioned to me an aunt who was a Soviet dissident, or a close friend in Ukraine, to explain why they hope that their country experiences a decisive military defeat.

These connections are the product of chance and accident. But chance and accident explain why Lena Nemirovskaya's modest goal—to make Russia a little bit more civilized—was not entirely naive. Because there is nothing inevitable, nothing genetic, nothing predetermined about any nation or its government. Only dictators believe that there are laws of history that have to be obeyed. Democrats, by contrast, know that the state will eventually adjust to society, not vice versa—and society, by definition, is always changing.

Russia's future will be shaped by how its leaders and citizens interpret the tragedy of this shocking, brutal, unnecessary war.

The cultural weight of the past is heavy, and the habits of autocracy—especially the habit of living in fear—persist. The attraction of power is also strong. The people who have it will not want to lose it, and the next government of Russia might well be even more repressive than the one that runs Russia now. But accidents happen; unexpected events occur. Countries evolve, sometimes creating better governments and sometimes worse ones.

Empires fall: The Russian empire fell, the Soviet empire fell, and sooner or later Putin's new Russian empire will fall too. From his prison cell, Kara-Murza has pointed out that the more than 17,000 detained anti-war protesters far outnumber the seven people who were arrested in Moscow's Red Square when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 to stop that country from changing. Nemirovskaya, from her exile in Riga, recently told me that her efforts were not in vain. She still believes that the three post-Soviet decades left their mark: Whatever happens next, "we will never again live the way we did then." Leonid Volkov, the leader of Navalny's organization in exile, told me last year that he believes the most important thing he and his colleagues can do is simply be prepared for change, whenever it comes.

I have argued before that there is no guarantee that American democracy can survive, that what happens to America tomorrow depends on the actions of Americans today. But the same is true of Russia. The country's future will be shaped not by mystical laws of history but by how its leaders and citizens absorb and interpret the tragedy of this shocking, brutal, unnecessary war. The best way that outsiders can help Russia change is to ensure that Ukraine takes back Ukrainian territory and defeats the empire. We can also keep supporting those Russians, however small their number, who understand why defeat is the only path to modernity; why military failure is necessary for the creation of a more prosperous, open society; and why, once again, the empire must die. We don't need to search for idealized "good Russians"—no savior will emerge to fix the country, not now and not ever. But Russians who believe the future can be different will keep trying to change their country, and someday they will succeed. In the meantime, no one should ever concede to Putin the right to define what it means to be Russian. He doesn't have that power.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline "Putin Must Lose." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/putin-russia-must-lose-ukraine-war-imperial-future/671891/

The Petulant King

Charles III can’t keep the myth of monarchy alive.

by Caitlin Flanagan



A difficult labor—30 hours!—and someone has to make the terrible decision. Right there in a Buckingham Palace bedroom, with mother and child etherized upon the table, deft hands make the cut, the unwilling baby is tugged out—and it’s done.

A boy! Clever girl.

To sleep, to sleep, to sleep.

Posted on the gates of the palace, a handwritten announcement:

> Her Royal Highness the Princess Elizabeth Duchess of Edinburgh was safely delivered of a Prince at 9.14 o'clock this evening. Her Royal Highness and the infant Prince are both well.

They are both children of empire, princess and prince, though as they lie there recovering, that empire is receding, the long, melancholy withdrawing roar audible even above the cheers of the crowds outside the palace.

They have been chosen for the same fate, but only one at a time can live it out. This will at once draw them together and complicate what will be a strange and mutually disappointing relationship. In just three years, Elizabeth will become the 25-year-old Queen of the United Kingdom, but Charles won't be King until he's 73. What must it be like to watch yourself fade into a middle-aged man and then an old one, but still your life's work has not begun? He is only hours old, and at the very start of the world's longest apprenticeship.

Only in fairy tales does it make sense to weep for a prince.

When he finally became King in September, not even a week passed before the tabloids were talking about his poor hands looking as red as lobster claws, perhaps because never before had so many people wanted to shake them. Things were not going perfectly! But they were going *well*. There was the hand-shaking—undertaken, however painfully, with his mother's famous commitment to *duty*—and there was the first speech to his people, with him sitting in Buckingham Palace doling out sinecures to all the good little kittens (Queen Consort for Camilla; Princess of Wales for well-behaved Kate; sweet fuck all for Meghan, who had dragged Harry off to the non-realm of California). Had he struck the right note when he referred to the late Queen as "my darling mama" rather than "my mother"? Everything he'd waited so long to do was happening so quickly.

But it was during a hop to Northern Ireland that the wheels came off the carriage, and Charles lost his cool. While signing the visitors' book at Hillsborough Castle, he wrote down the wrong date, was quietly informed

by Camilla that the pen was leaking, and seethed: “I can’t bear this bloody thing! … Every *stinking* time!”

There was something a little *Fawlty Towers* about the scene, and it gestured toward the fact that the English monarchy seemed to be downsizing. Charles’s mother had survived the Battle of Britain; he couldn’t survive a guest book.

But we’re ahead of ourselves! It’s Elizabeth who’s got to get out of that birthing bed and take the first shaky steps down the long corridors. The health of her father, George VI, is failing. Already, she has been performing some of his duties. Once she takes the throne, she’ll head off on many, many royal tours—some months long—leaving Charles, who will spend his childhood pining for her, behind.

During the first half of her reign, Elizabeth will preside—in her wholly symbolic, yet powerful way—over the final dismantling of the empire. She will be the last face of a centuries-long fiction of ownership, in which human beings, gold, precious gems, rubber—anything that could be chained up, prized from the Earth, grabbed from villages and palaces, or literally cut out of rock—was transformed into property of the British empire or its NGO, the unfathomably brutal East India Company.

Everything you saw at the Queen’s funeral—the sheer size of the regiments, their ornamental uniforms, the perfection of their marching, all of it so unbelievably out of step with modern, cash-strapped Britain—was a proud reminder of the days when Britain was the most powerful nation in the world, a place that could be hyped up in pubs and snooker halls the way football teams are now:

> Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves! Britons never, never, never will be slaves.

Consider the Queen’s—now the King’s—scepter, which figured so prominently in the service. What is that massive, glittering, unreal-seeming jewel at the top? The Great Star of Africa, one of many diamonds relocated from South Africa to the Crown’s vast holdings.

You would assume that Elizabeth would be despised in Britain's former colonies—she was, after all, the great-great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria, the first empress of India. But Elizabeth was admired by millions of people in many of those former colonies, from the earliest years of her reign to the hour of her death. Even now, when we view so much of world history through the lens of colonization and its devastations, the Queen is mourned.

Read: What the Queen's funeral taught me about Britain

Queen Elizabeth II was formal, interested, uncomplaining, and always respectful. Her warehouse's worth of matching coats and whimsical hats were an aspect of that respect. It didn't matter if she had arrived for a tour of your rat-extermination business in Manchester; she was dressed as if attending a new exhibit at the National Gallery. She seemed to understand that her fate and that of the rat exterminators were deeply bound together—which they were. She didn't really serve at the pleasure of God and the House of Windsor; she served at the pleasure of the exterminators and the takeaway-shop owners and the *Daily Mail*.

Once the sun had set on the British empire, the Queen began her more complicated mission, which was forming a coherent narrative of "England" and "Englishness" in the face of the great disrupter: 25 years of massive immigration. In 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair began relaxing immigration laws in hopes of creating an England imbued with the best traditions of a range of cultures, an England that was no longer fortified against the world but wide open to it, an oasis of people eating fusion cuisine and voting Labour.

In a way it's sort of worked, as any episode of *The Great British Bake Off* attests. To watch contestants from every racial, ethnic, and religious background tell the hosts the secret ingredient in "me gran's sponge" from inside a giant white tent pitched on the green lawns of a country house in Berkshire is to see "England" smacked down to a set of consumer preferences: Emma Bridgewater, strings of fluttering Union Jacks, cake.

But the old lessons of empire were not lost on the newcomers, a few of whom brought to England the same thing that England had once brought

them: contemptuous disregard of the religion, customs, habits, traditions, and shared beliefs of the native population. And that's how you get Sharia councils in modern England.

It fell to Elizabeth—older daughter of a man who never wanted or expected to be King, a woman with many interests of her own that she would much rather have pursued—to try to maintain the fantasy of a continuous England that could absorb within it wildly different cultures. What she relied upon was the West. The Englishmen who caused so much devastation around the world did not bring any miracles with them; they brought only bloodshed and cruelty and plunder, the same forces that had ruled the world since the beginning. But by the time of Elizabeth's reign, England understood itself as a *Western* nation, identifiable by its commitment to individual rights, equality, and self-determination. These values created the free world, and to the very limited extent that a Queen can stand for them—the Queen of a country with such a terrible imperial history—she was determined to do so.

Elizabeth never "celebrated" multiculturalism in the smarmy, meaningless way of college presidents or HR functionaries. But she often acknowledged how Britain was changing, never once disparaged it, and found within it a plausible case for continuity. What she did was locate—or possibly create—a unifying culture of Englishness as defined by the values of the Blitz: courage, calm, resolve.

Read: No one performed Britishness better than Her Majesty

Here she is just a couple of years ago (at 93!) giving a televised address about COVID-19: "I want to reassure you that if we remain united and resolute, then we will overcome it. I hope in the years to come, everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge. And those who come after us will say the Britons of this generation were as strong as any. That the attributes of self-discipline; of quiet, good-humored resolve; and of fellow feeling still characterize this country. The pride in who we are is not a part of our past; it defines our present and our future."

Well. Goddamn.

It was COVID, not war. She was just asking her subjects to wear a mask and watch the telly. But it sounded like a call to greatness.

And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

It was COVID, but it was also the Battle of Britain and Agincourt and all of it. Elizabeth spoke of Englishness and its enduring character, not of racial composition or traditional custom. She—of all people—said England's greatness wasn't in its past. It lies in its present and its future.

And now this whole delicate operation of creating a Britain in which the old and the new don't merely coexist, or inform each other, but are together part of a cohesive narrative of greatness, in which the monarch is both the defender of the Church of England and the symbolic leader of a country with 3 million Muslims—all of this has fallen to … Charles?

Weak, selfish, petulant Charles?

Only in fairy tales does it make sense to weep for a prince. That said, Charles's early years were sorrowful. He longed to be with his mother, but she was often away. One newsreel of the little boy captured him immaculately dressed, standing trustingly at his grandmother's side, looking anxiously down a train platform for any sign of his approaching mother. Once there, Elizabeth greeted her mother, and then—as an afterthought, almost—bent down neatly, pressed a light kiss on her child's head, and went about her ceremonial duties. Charles stared up at her in a bemused way, as though the months-long dream of "mother" had not really suggested this slender, preoccupied adult.

A word so often applied to Charles in his early years that you might have assumed it was a code word for *gay*—which he is not—was *sensitive*. There is nothing his ghastly father wanted less than a sensitive son, which only redoubled his certainty that Charles had to attend Prince Philip's own brutal, "make a man of you" Scottish boarding school, Gordonstoun, from which Charles begged to be rescued and where he complained of serious bullying.

What does *bullying* mean in the context of a mid-century, Scottish, all-male boarding school? It means, I would imagine, that it was a traumatic experience in a variety of ways. (Gordonstoun is under investigation by the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry for accusations of physical and sexual abuse of students from the 1960s to the 2010s.)

He did the required military duty (tangling his legs in the rigging on his first parachuting exercise, getting seasick on naval ships, and banging his head on low doorways belowdecks), and after that … the long, long wait, filled with the eccentric preoccupations of a country gentleman.

The aspect of Charles's character that makes him particularly unsuited to being King is that he's weak. How many men in the history of the world have managed to have a wife and a mistress without damn near burning down civilization? In his first address to the nation, he sounded less like he was assuming the throne of England than throwing his hat into the Pennsylvania Senate race. He promised to respect people no matter their heritage and beliefs and to uphold "constitutional principles" (well, that's a relief).

The world wants its treasures back, and it knows where to find them.

More than anything, what Elizabeth was able to do, for an astonishing 70 years, that her feckless son will not be able to do was prevent a very large bill from coming due. She was allowed to keep the Great Star of Africa and the palaces and the untold billions of pounds because she was Elizabeth.

But make no mistake, Charles has been handed an England in which a growing percentage of the population has no inclination to continue making nice with the Crown. After the racial-justice protests of 2020, statues of English slavers were taken down, one famously stomped by a mob. This is not an era of reconciliation and bygones being bygones. This is an era of reparations. A lot of people around the world don't want to "celebrate diversity," a concept wholly born of the dying West. They want their treasures back, and they know where to find them.

Most of them were stolen, and in the most sadistic way possible. Will Charles—Boomer Zero—be able to keep hold not merely of the things but

of the idea of England that his mother helped create?

Doubtful.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline "The Petulant King."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/king-charles-iii-keeping-monarchy-alive/671892/

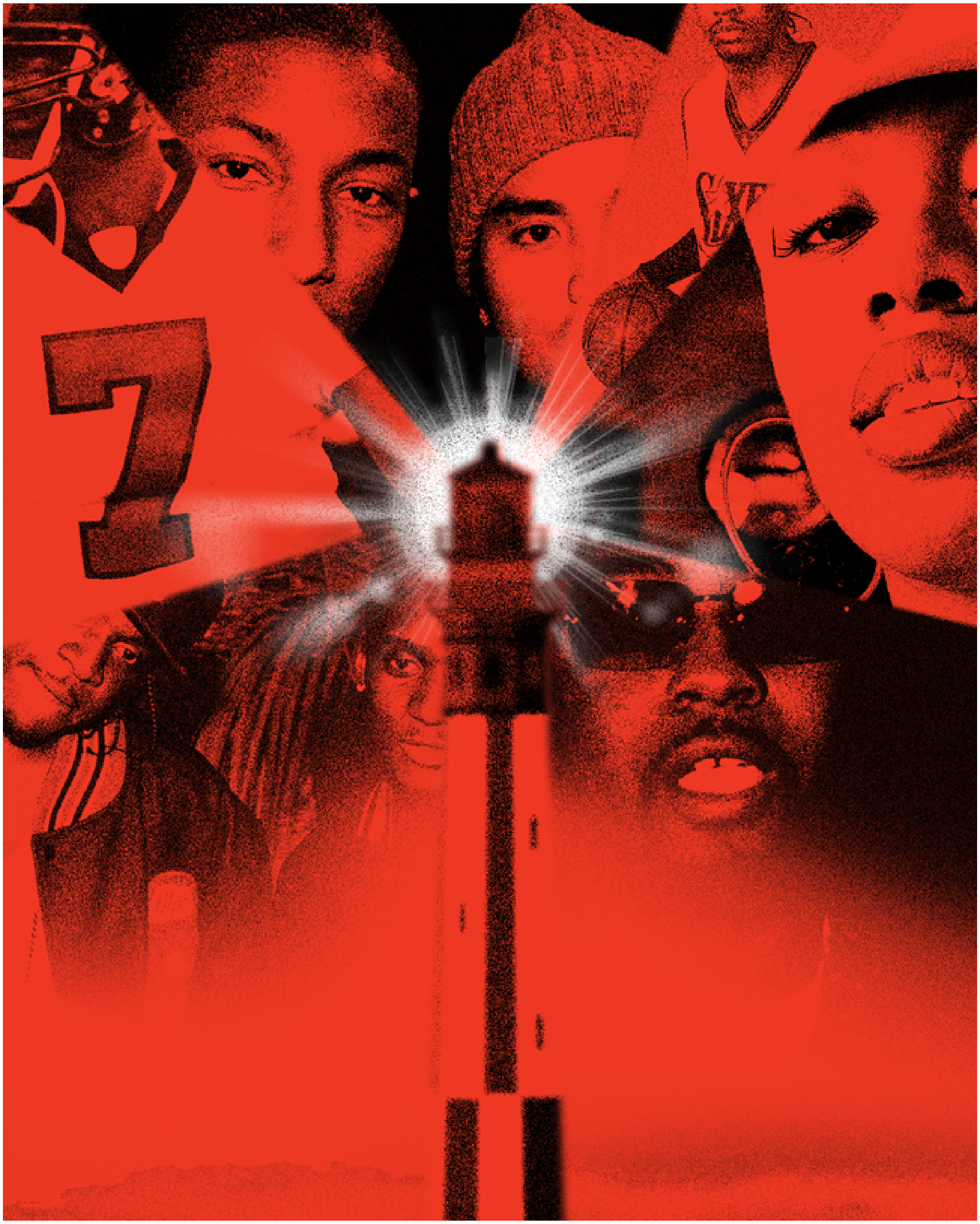
Culture & Critics

- The Year Virginia Rewrote the Rules of Popular Culture
- A New Theory of American Power
- How J. Edgar Hoover Went From Hero to Villain
- The Grimke Sisters and the Indelible Stain of Slavery

The Year Virginia Rewrote the Rules of Popular Culture

Missy Elliott. Timbaland. Allen Iverson. What was it about the Tidewater region in 2002?

by Mychal Denzel Smith



At the peak of his powers, Michael Vick could make a broken play look like it was planned. In 2002, as quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, he was a newly minted NFL star, known for his ability to confound defenses with his deep passes and exhilarating runs. In my Virginia Beach high school, this

was the year of the Michael Vick jersey; we were about a Vick-length scramble from his hometown of Newport News. Sure, Vick played in Atlanta, but we were keenly aware that he was bred from our soil, and we were proud of his ascension to the national stage.

In December of that year, when the Falcons played the Minnesota Vikings, Vick more than confirmed his star status. The game was tied at 24 in overtime, and Vick had the ball. Facing an oncoming pass rush, he instinctively moved to the left, his strong side, and found a running lane. Most other quarterbacks of that era would likely have taken a few yards and slid to avoid a blow from an opposing linebacker. But Vick kept running. Two defenders closed in on him, one on each side. The defender to his left missed the tackle altogether, and the one to his right got just a handful of jersey. Vick charged on another 20-plus yards into the end zone for the touchdown, and the Falcons won. As the teams cleared the field, a television announcer said: “Is there any doubt as to who will be the most valuable player in the NFL this season?” Vick didn’t end up winning the award, but plays like this one made him a household name nonetheless.

It was a good year to be from Virginia, and to rewrite the rules. Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott—born and raised in the shipping town of Portsmouth—had us all convinced she must be saying *something* on the gibberish-sounding chorus to her hit single “Work It,” if only we could decipher it. In reality, what we heard was a studio mistake that played her preceding vocals (“Is it worth it? / Let me work it / I put my thang down flip it and reverse it”) backwards (“Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gnaht ym tup”). But Missy liked the way it sounded; the string of nonsensical words perfectly complements the frenetic energy of the robots-and-lasers-meets-’80s-hip-hop beat. “Work It,” which was co-produced by Missy’s musical partner Timbaland (from Virginia Beach), became her highest *Billboard*-charting single, peaking at No. 2, and helped her fourth album, *Under Construction*, achieve double-platinum status.

Songs by artists and producers from the Tidewater region were all over the charts. The Neptunes—the production duo of Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo, both raised in Virginia Beach—made hit tracks across multiple genres for the likes of Busta Rhymes, ’NSync, Beenie Man, LL Cool J, and Clipse (a pair of brothers, Pusha T and Malice, who were also from Virginia

Beach). In 2002, the Neptunes had their first No. 1 single with Nelly's "Hot in Herre," a percussion-heavy dance number with a go-go-inspired beat. For Justin Timberlake's solo debut, *Justified*, released in November 2002, the singer enlisted the Neptunes and Timbaland to shape his emergent sound, a mix of pop, dance, hip-hop, and soul.

Read: Missy Elliott is reclaiming her legacy

You would be forgiven for not realizing just how influential Virginia was 20 years ago. The cultural innovators from Atlanta and New Orleans who bubbled up around the same time were consuming a lot of oxygen. In retrospect, though, Vick, Missy, Timbaland, and the Neptunes—not to mention Allen Iverson, born and raised in Hampton, and perhaps the most popular and polarizing NBA player of that era—amounted to a boldly creative wave.

Not having much of a local cultural legacy to draw on also meant not having much of a legacy to be beholden to.

Iverson, both beloved and criticized for his swagger and streetball-inspired play, embodied this spirit. It was also the year of his infamous, misunderstood "practice rant." At a press conference following a disappointing season for the Philadelphia 76ers, a reporter repeatedly questioned Iverson's dedication to the game, after he'd reportedly missed practice. Iverson balked at the suggestion that he had let down his team. "I'm supposed to be the franchise player," he said, "and we're in here talking about practice … not the game that I go out there and die for and play every game like it's my last, not the game—we're talking about *practice*." Iverson recognized, and rejected, the subtext: the old, pernicious idea that "flashy" Black players lacked work ethic. However theatrically expressed, his exasperation, heightened by the grief of having recently lost a close friend to gun violence, was real.

What was it about the Tidewater area that produced so many audacious cultural figures? I can't help thinking that restlessness thrives when your career options seem limited to joining the military (the naval base in Norfolk was a big employer), getting a military-adjacent job (plenty of those in Hampton Roads), or selling crack. As Clipse memorably put it on

“Virginia,” their dark 2002 ode to the state, the commonwealth is a place “where ain’t shit to do but cook.” (Clipse rapped candidly, unapologetically, and relentlessly about the crack trade.) It may have also helped that these rappers and athletes didn’t have much of a local cultural legacy to draw on, which in turn meant not having much of a legacy to be beholden to. The area could feel like a cultural hinterland. “We got everything so late,” Missy told the writer Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah in 2017, that “it also allowed us to be different because we didn’t hear.” They had to become architects.

To be young, Black, and creative in Virginia at the turn of the millennium certainly was not a recipe for any type of success one could predict. After 1989 the message was clear: Virginia’s primary way of interacting with young Black people was through neglect or hostility. That year, the Virginia Beach police overreacted to Greekfest—an annual Labor Day–weekend gathering of Black college students, many of them members of Black fraternities and sororities—and the festival turned into two days of rioting. Cops on horses swung batons as festivalgoers shouted “Fight the power!” Police and civilians were injured, and some 100 businesses faced an estimated $1 million worth of damage. The tourism slogan that Virginia was “for lovers” rang hollow to some of its own inhabitants.

From the September 2020 issue: Mychal Denzel Smith on how police reform isn’t enough

An unexpected boost came in the form of Teddy Riley, the king of the new jack swing genre. In the early ’90s, Riley moved down to Virginia Beach from his native New York City. He discovered the Neptunes at a high-school talent show and later signed them to a deal; they ended up writing on and co-producing some Riley-led tracks. While Riley was working on “Rump Shaker” (Pharrell wrote his verse), Timbaland was DJ-ing in Virginia. He had previously collaborated with Pharrell, who is his cousin, in a group they called S.B.I., or Surrounded by Idiots. (They were teenagers.) After the dissolution of that group, a mutual friend introduced Timbaland to Missy, who was part of a girl group then called Fayze, and the two bonded. Their breakthrough as a songwriting/producing duo came with their work on Aaliyah’s 1996 album, *One in a Million*.



Malice, Pharrell Williams, and Pusha T in 2003. The brothers Malice (who now goes by No Malice) and Pusha T made up the Clipse duo. (KMazur / Getty)

Iverson, too, was a catalyst. He had been well known in the area as a high-school basketball and football star—though his career prospects were nearly derailed when, at 18, he was convicted on felony charges of "maiming by mob" after his participation in a bowling-alley fight drawn along racial lines. (The charges stem from an obscure Virginia law originally meant as an anti-lynching measure.) But he was soon granted conditional clemency by then-Governor Douglas Wilder, and he went on to play at Georgetown. Ultimately, his conviction was overturned, and in 1996, Iverson became the NBA's No. 1 draft pick. A few years later, Vick, a dazzling Warwick High School quarterback (whose mother knew Iverson's), drew comparisons to the basketball player: Here was another homegrown future star at work. Vick's signature style gelled in his two seasons at Virginia Tech, where he took the schoolyard ethos that defined Iverson's game and put it to use on the gridiron. He went on to be the No. 1 NFL draft pick in 2001.

A few more NFL players from the region have come up after Vick, but none of them has quite captured his star power (and Vick all but ended his career a few years later, when he pleaded guilty to bankrolling a dogfighting ring). There has never been another Iverson. And although Pusha T, Missy, Timbaland, and Pharrell have all enjoyed continued success, no new crop of

artists has come behind them waving Virginia's flag. Nor has Virginia become a destination for iconoclastic reinventors who want to make their broken plays and backward lyrics look planned.

Which isn't to say that these pioneers have had no lasting impact; Virginia is everywhere if you know what to look for. So many of today's NBA stars take after Iverson, whether we're talking about the arms covered in tattoos or the way they execute a crossover. Sure, Tom Brady is widely considered the GOAT, but for every young NFL quarterback worth watching, the prototype is Vick, combining an accurate cannon arm with serious running speed, if not quite his catch-me-if-you-can zeal. And the music of Missy, Timbaland, and the Neptunes/Pharrell has spent a cumulative 888 weeks on the *Billboard* charts since the beginning of 2002—meaning that if you have listened to music, even casually, over the past 20 years, you've almost certainly listened to music created by someone from Virginia, someone who got their start by doing things their own way.

Nowadays, when Virginia makes headlines, it's because of things like the alt-right uprising in Charlottesville, a governor's blackface scandal, fights over critical race theory in schools, or rules that make life harsher for transgender children. In 2019, Pharrell tried something different. The live-music landscape was shifting to focus more on festival-style concerts, and Pharrell, working with the Virginia Beach chief of police, looked to establish his hometown as a site for a weekend-long event that would invite tourism, commerce, and artists from all over to the Tidewater area. He called it "Something in the Water," and it was a success. Everyone involved hoped that the festival would return after a COVID-prompted hiatus. But then, in March 2021, a Virginia Beach police officer—allegedly responding to reports of gunshots—shot and killed Pharrell's 25-year-old cousin, Donovon Lynch. Citing Virginia Beach's "toxic energy," Pharrell moved the 2022 iteration of the festival up north to Washington, D.C.

For now, 2002 exists as an anomaly, one that doesn't even have its own lore to accompany it, because no one bothered to notice. I worry that I'm making too much of it myself, trying to read meaning into a set of lyrics played backwards. Maybe I need to believe there's something in the water, because I drank it. But when I hear Neptunes beats bumping down the street of my

Brooklyn neighborhood, I know the rest of the world has been feeling that something too.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline "Tidewater Renaissance."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/virginia-athletes-musicians-cultural-influence/671898/

A New Theory of American Power

The United States can—and must—wield its power for good.

by George Packer



A national mood disorder afflicts America, causing wild swings between mania and despair, superhuman exertion and bruised withdrawal. We overdo our foreign crusades, and then we overdo our retrenchments, never pausing in between, where an ordinary country would try to reach a fine balance.

American exceptionalism has two faces, equally transfixed with a sense of specialness—one radiant with the nation's unique beneficence, the other sunk in its unrivaled malignity. These extremes, confounding friends as well as enemies, are unrealistic and unsustainable.

Until the early hours of February 24, when Russian tank columns crossed the Ukrainian border and airborne troops targeted Kyiv, the United States was a chastened and declining superpower. The Biden administration seemed to have picked up where the Trump administration left off, accepting the harsh diagnosis of critics: After 20 years of failed wars, the age of intervention was over. Any thought of using force to transform other countries met the definition of insanity. A wave of recent books—Spencer Ackerman's *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump*, Andrew Bacevich's *After the Apocalypse: America's Role in a World Transformed*, Samuel Moyn's *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War*, Luke Mogelson's *The Storm Is Here: An American Crucible*—portrays a country so warped by endless war, white supremacy, and violence that its very nature now drives it to dominate and destroy. Ackerman concludes that it is "increasingly difficult to see America as anything more than its War on Terror."

The best that such a country can do for the world is as little as possible. After the fall of Afghanistan, Moyn, a law and history professor at Yale, told *Vox*: "The most remarkable fact about liberals today is that, aside from a few, they've all learned their lesson." What lesson? That "humanitarian intervention" is a contradiction, and war itself almost always wrong; that the U.S. cannot change other countries and does a lot of harm trying; that Americans are willing to accept far too much violence in the name of "security" and "democracy"; that the period of American global hegemony was a disaster best consigned to history.

In the past half decade, this deep skepticism has led to an odd convergence of views. From opposed starting points, the pacifist, anti-imperialist left and the nationalist, "America First" right have arrived at a common position: restraint. They have been joined by geopolitical "realists" from the center—mostly academic experts—who view international relations in terms of national interests and security, holding that the goal of foreign policy should

be stability among great powers, not the spread of democracy and human rights.

The old labels have lost their predictability. Progressives now call for a return to "spheres of influence," and conservatives denounce the U.S. military; *The Intercept* and Fox News sometimes sound alike; Noam Chomsky recently praised the statesmanship of Donald Trump. The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft (named for John Quincy Adams, who warned the young American republic not to go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy") emerged in 2019 as a stronghold of restrainers from across the spectrum. It draws experts from the staff of former Vice President Dick Cheney, the Nation Institute, the oil industry, and the CIA; they've been paid by both George Soros and Charles Koch.

Beneath the restrainers' views lies a shared hostility to what they often call "liberal elites"—the policy makers and plugged-in experts and pundits who never listened, and whom they despise for continuing to see America as a benevolent power. How could anyone still believe that fairy tale? For restrainers on the right, liberal zeal threatens national sovereignty and traditional values around the world and at home. For those on the left, democracy is the pretty lie that hides the brutality of capitalism and imperialism. These views are at bottom antithetical: The right wants more national power without international rules, and the left wants the nation-state to disappear. But the two sides have made a temporary marriage at what they see as liberalism's sickbed.

From the March 2022 issue: George Packer on the betrayal of Afghanistan

With the withdrawal last year of the final troops from Kabul, restraint appeared to have won an uncontested victory. It lasted six months.

In February, as more than 130,000 Russian troops massed on the Ukrainian border, restrainers refused to believe the Biden administration's warning that Vladimir Putin was about to invade. A war would upend their fixed views of international politics: that states pursue rational interests, not mad dreams of ancient glory; that U.S. leaders manufacture intelligence for their own ends; that imperialism is a uniquely American sin. Therefore, a war wasn't

possible. When it came anyway, restrainers found ways to place the blame on the U.S.:

"Emulation of the American way of being in the world is largely complete with Putin's shock and awe assault."

"The neocons on the right ... they're power drunk, they are bloodthirsty, and they cannot be trusted ... Joe Biden is sleepwalking us towards war."

"At first Putin's invasion of Ukraine had at least the morally instructive quality of showing what a humanitarian intervention looks like from the other side."

"It's very important to understand that we invented this story that Putin is highly aggressive and he's principally responsible for this crisis in Ukraine."

These statements could all have come from the left, right, or center. As it happens, in order they're from Pankaj Mishra, a left-wing anti-imperialist; Joe Kent, a pro-Trump Republican candidate for Congress in Washington State; Thomas Meaney, whose career has spanned the Claremont Institute and the *New Left Review*; and John Mearsheimer, a realist international-relations scholar. They give neither Russia nor Ukraine any agency—only the U.S. drives history. The war is not about Putin's fantasy of a restored empire, or Ukraine's determination to remain an independent democracy. It's simply one move of a long game in which America is the aggressive player, Russia a threatened opponent capable of being restored to reason, and Ukraine a hapless pawn. Putin was only reacting to NATO's expansion to Russia's borders.

From the October 2022 issue: Ukrainians are defending the values Americans claim to hold

None of this analysis held up. The NATO alliance has always remained a defensive one, posing no military threat to the Russian Federation, never seriously considering Ukrainian membership, and guilty of no historic betrayal, either, as the Johns Hopkins historian M. E. Sarotte shows in *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post–Cold War Stalemate*. The book argues that both superpowers squandered the chance for

cooperation after the Cold War, but it refutes the Russian claim that expansion broke an explicit American promise to advance NATO "not one inch eastward." In any case, Putin had offered an entirely different justification on the eve of the invasion: Ukraine was part of Russia. Ukraine didn't exist.

In the months following February 24, a few restrainers quietly changed their minds on Ukraine; others fell silent about one of the most important geopolitical events of the century. Most persisted with the conviction that American arms would achieve nothing, that a doomed Ukraine should find the quickest way out of pointless bloodshed by negotiating away territory and human beings for neutrality and peace. When I went to Ukraine this past spring, Oleksandr Sushko, the executive director of a prodemocracy foundation in Kyiv, told me that some progressive American colleagues recoiled when Ukrainians like him spoke of fighting for liberal values. "Don't say the word *freedom*," Sushko was warned, "because 'freedom' was used to intervene somewhere in the world." In an essay, Samuel Moyn advised the West to follow the example of countries in the "global south" and criticize the invasion without doing a thing to stop it—which would have left Ukraine a Russian-occupied wasteland and encouraged future aggressors around the world.

With the withdrawal last year of the final troops from Kabul, restraint appeared to have won an uncontested victory. It lasted six months.

This restraint is not a hard-won prudence in the face of tragic facts. It's a doctrinaire refusal, by people living in the safety and comfort of the West, to believe in liberal values that depend on American support. The restrainers can't accept that politics leaves no one clean, and that the most probable alternative to U.S. hegemony is not international peace and justice but worse hegemons. They can't face the reality that force never disappears from the world; it simply changes hands.

Meanwhile, the war has reduced their position to rubble. U.S. intelligence turned out to be accurate. Putin has rejected any serious negotiations, both before invading and since. His purpose is not to neutralize or "liberate" Ukraine, but to annihilate it for the dream of Greater Russia. Occupying troops have committed atrocities on an unimagined scale. NATO weapons

have allowed Ukrainians to defend themselves and eventually regain lost territory in a conflict they understand to be a fight for survival. European support has not disintegrated under Russian blackmail. American leadership has proved decisive in holding the West together in defense of collective security and democratic values. The war is about freedom. Russia is likely to lose.

But we should pause before closing the book on the post-9/11 years and never listening to the restrainers again. The war has kindled hope, at times bordering on triumphalism, for a renewal of liberal democracy, not just as a guide to foreign policy but as a mission at home. In September, the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama told *The Washington Post*, "If Ukraine is able to defeat Russia, the demonstration effect is going to be really tremendous. It's going to have domestic political consequences inside every democracy that's threatened by one of these populist parties … I do think that we could recover a little bit of the spirit of 1989. Ukraine could trigger something like that in the United States and Europe."

Imagining that a Ukrainian victory would have a decisive effect on the internal politics of Western democracies is unwarranted exuberance. Illiberal populism continues to thrive in countries whose governments support Ukraine—Poland, the U.K., France, Italy, Sweden. The major non-Western democracies—India, Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa—have stayed more or less neutral on the war; India began to criticize only when Russia began to lose. In the U.S., arming Ukraine still has bipartisan backing in Congress and from the public, but a Republican win in the midterm elections could allow the party's Trumpist wing to block military aid; and if Trump is reelected in 2024, the U.S. might well switch sides. In that case, American politics would transform Ukraine, not the other way around.

From the January/February 2022 issue: George Packer on how to fend off Trump's next coup

In 1989 it was possible to believe that Europe would lead the way toward a more integrated, cosmopolitan world under an American security umbrella; it was easy to discount the force of nationalism. That ceased to be true a long time ago, as Fukuyama knows: It's the subject of his latest book, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. He argues persuasively that liberalism—individual

freedom, equal rights, rule of law, consent of the governed, open markets, scientific rationalism—is in retreat around the world, not because of "a fundamental weakness in the doctrine," but because of "the way that liberalism has evolved over the last couple of generations." The causes of its decline run deep: globalization, rapid technological change, inequality, mass migration, institutional sclerosis, failures of leadership. In the past few decades, an exaggerated emphasis on freedom has driven polarization in democracies, including ours: radical egalitarianism on the left, reactionary authoritarianism on the right. Both forms of illiberalism seek to forge group identities—exclusive, intolerant ones, steeped in resentment—to replace the national identities that have become corroded in an era of globalization.

Fukuyama believes that liberalism can recover and thrive again through "a sense of moderation," by toning down its individualistic extremes—sensible advice, but not exactly an antidote to a global crisis that has reached even Sweden. When writers like Fukuyama and Robert Kagan—in his 2018 book, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*—call for liberalism's renewal, they often assume its self-evident appeal. They downplay the erosion of American legitimacy and will, and they gloss over a question that doesn't interest the restrainers but that has returned in full force with a new European war: Can America still lead? And if not, can the liberal order survive?

The institutions and rules of the postwar era, which enabled a historic expansion of freedom and prosperity around the world, depended on not just U.S. power but the American example. It doesn't seem possible for liberal democracy to remain healthy abroad but not at home, and vice versa. Its decay in the U.S. has coincided with the rise of authoritarianism globally. The likely successor is not, as the left wishes, world government and international law under the aegis of the United Nations, but rival nationalisms, including Trump's "America First," with "might makes right" in every neighborhood.

The Biden administration, while disavowing the term *cold war*, is already waging one—invoking a global contest between democracy and autocracy, using industrial policy to gain strategic advantage over China in areas such as microchip production. In *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today*, Hal Brands, a historian at the

Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, revisits the U.S.-Soviet contest for its now-forgotten lessons on how to conduct "high-stakes, long-term competitions." But a new twilight struggle would be far murkier than the Cold War's stark ideological contest between two systems across the globe. China, a totalitarian state that delivers the goods, is the obvious peer adversary today, but Brands also includes Russia, though he was writing before Putin and Xi Jinping announced a friendship with "no limits" between their two countries on February 4 at the Beijing Olympics. Their statement featured the terms *multipolarity*, *polycentric world order*, and *civilizational diversity*, but its real message for the U.S. and the West was blunt: You had your turn—now butt out. Three weeks later, Putin gave the world a look at the multipolar future.

American policy in the original Cold War was to contain Soviet communism until it finally altered its character or collapsed. This time around there's no universal ideology to combat, only brutal, cynical dictatorships. Illiberalism today is entirely negative. In place of utopia, it offers resentment—of American power, Western elites, decadent globalists. Putin gives the Russian people nothing they're willing to die for. When he declares a national emergency, they flock to the airports and borders rather than risk their skins in defense of the motherland.

Brands is concerned with "winning a long-term rivalry," but what this would mean today isn't clear. Maintaining military and technological supremacy? The fall of authoritarian regimes? Limitless expansion of the free world? Or something more modest, like improved behavior from Moscow and Beijing? Brands is well aware of flaws in the Cold War analogy, but he doesn't reckon with the most important difference. When the last twilight struggle began, the U.S. had just emerged from the ruins of World War II energized and unified by victory, the world's dominant country by far. Today we can't hold an election without fear of civil war. Any thought of winning a new cold war has to start from this dismal fact.

Rather than relearning the lessons of the Cold War, or overlearning those of the post-9/11 years, we have to escape the old pattern of wild swings by facing what is new. We're left to resolve two hard and conflicting truths: Autocratic regimes will exploit American restraint to enlarge their power at the expense of their own people, their neighbors, and the international order.

But American action will stoke illiberal reactions when it brings domination, not freedom.

One way out of this dilemma was proposed by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams in 1821, when, after warning against going abroad to destroy monsters, he added: America "is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example." The best thing we can do for the world's disrepair is to fix our own collapsing house. That sentiment is becoming more and more common today, expressing a prudent sense of limits. Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, recently wrote that "democracy promotion at home rather than abroad should be the focus of U.S. attention," because there's more at stake here and a better chance of success.

But separating these projects is a lot harder to do in the postwar, post–Cold War world than it was two centuries ago. Striving to be an exemplary bystander, for all the urgency of our own problems, is too narrow an approach, either abroad or at home. The American-led order lasted three-quarters of a century, and people struggling for democracy in other countries are less eager to see it end than the Quincy Institute is. Even when they resent our interference, they also want our support. And in this country, invocations of "national interest" and strategies for "long-term rivalry" absorb experts more than they move ordinary people. As American history shows, we're loath to sacrifice for an international cause that has nothing to do with freedom.

Russia's war has demonstrated that a decent world isn't possible without liberalism, and liberalism can't thrive without U.S. engagement. Ukraine shows one way for America to use its power on behalf of freedom: Instead of sending troops to fight and die for democratic illusions in inhospitable countries, send arms to help an actual democracy repel a foreign invader. No U.S. troops, no meddling in civil wars, no nation building, no going it alone. Collaborate closely with allies and take measures to avoid catastrophe. Call it the Biden doctrine—it's been remarkably successful.

In the age of Putin, Xi, and Trump, liberalism and nationalism seem to be mortally opposed. In a healthy society, they're inextricable.

Do its principles extend beyond this war? For example, what can the U.S. do to support Iran's democratic protests that wouldn't ultimately undermine the cause and, eventually, bipartisan backing at home? Broader sanctions would further the destruction of Iran's middle class. Withdrawing from nuclear talks during this brutal crackdown, though the right thing to do, would not affect the regime's behavior. The Biden administration—unlike the Obama administration during an earlier surge of protest in 2009—has chosen to give Iran's brave young demonstrators strong rhetorical support and practical help in the form of access to satellite communications as a way around the regime's internet blackout. Any deeper U.S. involvement in an internal struggle as dramatic and enduring as Iran's—for example, arming insurgents or trying to manipulate regime change—would be destructive, and it would stir up the kind of domestic battle that precludes steady, reliable support for democracy abroad.

This recognition of limits would make a foreign policy founded on liberal values more persuasive abroad and more sustainable with the American electorate, holding off the next oscillation toward grandiosity or gloom. Where democracy exists, strengthen it and defend it against foreign subversion, if necessary with arms. Where it doesn't, take care to understand particular movements for change, and offer only support that preserves their legitimacy. Align U.S. policy with the universal desire for freedom, but maintain a keen sense of unintended consequences and no illusions of easy success.

Liberalism suffers from inherent weaknesses that Putin and other autocrats shrewdly exploit. Championing borderless values such as freedom and equality, it falls prey to a kind of imperialist zeal (in his September speech announcing the illegal annexation of four Ukrainian regions, Putin held up Russia as a bulwark against Western colonialism). Declining to affirm any transcendent moral order, liberalism loses its attractive power when it offers a flat world with a smartphone in every pocket and nothing meaningful to live for. And it triggers bitter reaction when it fails to grasp the abiding appeal of nationalism.

In the age of Putin, Xi, and Trump, liberalism and nationalism seem to be mortally opposed. The first is universal (“globalist,” in the derisive phrase of nationalists), the second particular; the first ennobles the individual, the second exalts the community. But in a healthy society, liberalism and nationalism coexist; in fact, they’re inextricable. Without shared identity and strong social bonds, liberty atomizes citizens into consumers, spectators, gamers—easy targets for a demagogue. But national solidarity can’t endure if it’s coerced. A people kept compliant with lies of national greatness, shopping, and police roundups will turn on one another in the face of crisis.

When I asked Ukrainians what the war was about, they inevitably gave two answers in a single phrase: survival and freedom. “Patriot war and democratic war—you cannot distinguish,” Denys Surkov, a crew-cut, scowling doctor, told me. “It’s the same war.” Ukraine is fighting for its existence as an independent nation, and for the right of Ukrainians to choose their own way of life, their own form of government—which is democracy. These two causes are inseparable and reinforce each other. Without a sense of nationhood, Ukrainians wouldn’t have the unity and collective will to resist at such a steep price. Without liberal values and a democratic government, Ukraine would likely divide into ethnic and regional factions.

Something similar is true here in the U.S. Our national identity has always been rooted in democracy. Nothing else, not blood and soil, shared ethnicity or faith, common memories or moneyed pursuits, has ever really held Americans together—only what Walt Whitman called “the fervid and tremendous idea.” It’s as fragile as it is compelling, and when it fails, we dissolve into hateful little tribes, and autocrats here and abroad smile and rub their hands. Don’t imagine that America can bring the light of freedom to the world, but don’t think the world will be better off if we just stop trying.

This article appears in the [December 2022](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2022/12/) print edition with the headline “America Can Still Lead.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/american-foreign-policy-in-wartime/671899/

How J. Edgar Hoover Went From Hero to Villain

Before his abuses of power were exposed, he was celebrated as a scourge of Nazis, Communists, and subversives.

by Jack Goldsmith



Five decades after his death, J. Edgar Hoover still haunts the FBI. His nearly 48-year reign as its director, from 1924 to 1972, has come to symbolize the dangers of a stealth domestic police-and-intelligence agency in an open society. Hoover is widely seen today as an autocrat who used secret

surveillance and other illegal means to control politicians and infiltrate and disrupt domestic political groups in the service of his conservative worldview. No operation confirms this verdict more vividly than the FBI's wide-ranging electronic surveillance of Martin Luther King Jr., which culminated in a threatening letter to King accompanied by tape recordings of romantic trysts—an effort designed to drive King from the civil-rights movement or induce him to commit suicide.

In her masterful, 732-page biography of Hoover, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century*, the Yale historian Beverly Gage carefully chronicles all of the major abuses committed by his FBI. She also shows that the prevailing image of Hoover as a "one-dimensional tyrant and backroom schemer who strong-armed the rest of the country into submission" is a distortion. Hoover emerges instead as a still-flawed figure, yet more team player than solo villain. He understood that his success depended on public approval, which he was adept at building. Just as crucial was high-level support for his actions (covert as well as overt), under liberal and conservative administrations alike, which he worked assiduously to secure. Hoover's pragmatism helped curb, at various junctures, his dogmatism and extremist tactics.

Hoover was also significantly aided, Gage notes, by a mid-century consensus, which he reinforced, on the need to confront threats to the state—primarily Nazis, communists, and gangsters. When the aging Hoover targeted civil-rights activists, Vietnam protesters, and other 1960s radicals, he ventured onto much more contested political terrain. An appeal to nonpartisan principles could no longer justify his actions, especially after the bureau's secret and often abhorrent methods began to leak. Within a few years of Hoover's death, in 1972, his apolitical aura was gone, his reputation was ruined, and his organization's credibility was destroyed.

From the July/August 2002 issue: The FBI and Martin Luther King

The subsequent reforms of the bureau—which made it independent of political actors, more beholden to law, and more transparent—sought to remove Hoover's taint and reclaim public confidence. Yet the FBI in the Donald Trump era (not yet over) has been denounced as politically biased often enough to fuel worry about a crisis of legitimacy. First came the head-

snapping denunciations of the bureau by different halves of the country when its director, James Comey, announced his decisions not to recommend prosecution in the Hillary Clinton email imbroglio, then to reopen the investigation 11 days before the 2016 presidential election, and then to clear Clinton two days before the election. Sharply partisan reactions to the bureau's investigations of Trump's many law-skirting and norm-defying activities have followed.

Gage's penetrating account of Hoover's career, especially his many long-eclipsed triumphs, offers a well-timed and sobering perspective as yet another institution in our fractured country struggles to maintain trust. Hoover worked hard—and successfully for many decades—to construct a bureau that was widely seen to embody nonpartisan vigilance. It's an achievement that the modern, embattled FBI might envy.

In July 1919, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer appointed the 24-year-old Hoover, who had worked in the Justice Department since 1917, to lead the Radical Division in the department's Bureau of Investigation, as it was then called. There Hoover used his gift for collecting and cataloging masses of information to build dossiers on suspected anarchists, socialists, and communists. He also played a central role in the infamous peacetime roundup of thousands of foreign-born communists on January 2, 1920. The episode was the "greatest blunder of his young life," Gage writes. Hoover was oblivious to due process, and his filing system failed: In addition to cases of mistaken identity, few of the arrested radicals were found to pose actual threats.

But Hoover did more than survive the blunder. In 1924, amid charges of corruption in the Bureau of Investigation, President Calvin Coolidge's upright new attorney general, Harlan F. Stone, appointed him acting director of the bureau with orders to professionalize the organization, stick to the letter of the law, and end political surveillance. (Why Stone didn't clean house is not explained.) Over the next eight years, Hoover worked to establish that he was a restrained technocrat who could be trusted. He improved the quality of agents (though not the variety: He hired only male lawyers or accountants). He also burnished his civil-liberties image, and built up the bureau's technical expertise with a criminal-fingerprint clearinghouse, a cutting-edge forensics lab, and a crime-statistics division.

The bureau's relatively modest role in federal law enforcement during this era helped his mission. It was barely involved in the organized-crime problems that arose during Prohibition. Its agents were not authorized to carry guns, and it eschewed wiretapping, informants, and rough police tactics.

Hoover worked hard—and successfully for many decades—to construct a bureau that was widely seen to embody nonpartisan vigilance.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's arrival in the White House in 1933, Gage shows, changed everything for Hoover and the bureau. Following the repeal of Prohibition that year, the president consolidated all government detective agencies and put Hoover in charge. A string of new federal criminal laws, passed in response to a surge in violent crime, swelled the investigatory reach of the bureau (renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935). Congress now authorized agents to carry weapons and make arrests. Urged by Roosevelt to "build up a body of public opinion" to support the bureau's leadership in fighting FDR's "War on Crime," Hoover became a master at trumpeting FBI successes in the press and popular culture. (*G-Men*, a pulp magazine that included a Hoover speech per issue along with tales of his "famous cases," was just the start.) Even as he criticized New Deal social workers and their ilk during public appearances, he also pulled off the feat of presenting himself and his agents as hyper-competent, nonpartisan New Deal professionals.

In 1936, Roosevelt invited Hoover back into the business of political surveillance—a fateful move. Amid widespread labor strikes and social protests, a president concerned about national security, and about his reelection, asked his FBI chief to secretly investigate "Fascism and Communism." Hoover jumped at the opportunity. Roosevelt later authorized FBI investigations of other "subversives" before and during World War II. The scale of Hoover's surveillance and infiltration of these groups remained secret. But after Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, the president announced that the FBI was pursuing spies and saboteurs. And Hoover told Congress that he was compiling "extensive indices" of individuals and groups engaged in "any activities that are possibly detrimental to the internal security of the United States." When the FBI began to arrest Nazi and communist sympathizers, progressive and liberal

critics decried the actions as an unacceptable return to Hoover's dark days running the Radical Division.

Public concerns about civil liberties began to recede after the German invasion of France in June 1940. And Hoover, having learned his lesson in 1920, worked hard to legitimate his wartime actions. He cultivated relationships with ACLU and NAACP leaders and pledged fealty to their civil-rights concerns. He opposed the West Coast internment of Japanese Americans and investigated white southern lynchers. He arrested few political dissidents. By the final months of the war, Gage writes, Hoover was "a darling of the New Deal establishment, known as a protector of civil liberties and a vanquisher of Nazis, saboteurs, and race-baiters."

This public judgment reflected Hoover's firm control over what the world learned about the bureau's activities. He made sure to keep secret its spying on the ACLU and NAACP even while he was buttering them up. Only a handful of people in the government knew of the bureau's investigative reports, written at Roosevelt's request, on the sexual practices of government officials as well as on the president's wartime detractors (including isolationists, union officials, and civil-rights activists). Nor did the public know that the by-now-gargantuan FBI had prodigious surveillance capabilities that it would continue to exercise in peacetime.

After the war, Hoover's main obsession was the threat of communism. Gage shows that in the 1940s and '50s, Soviet infiltration of the U.S. government and civil society was real and serious. Hoover spoke out vehemently against the "diabolical plots" of the Communist Party. Yet he faced a trickier balancing act in securing public support for the bureau's approach, and at first he found himself charged with red-baiting by many liberals and progressives. Hoover knew much more than the public did about the scale of the problem because he had access to supersecret intelligence programs that revealed clues about the identity of Soviet spies and details about Moscow's relationship with the American Communist Party. The need to protect these programs sometimes kept Hoover both from convicting Soviet spies and from substantiating his public warnings about the Red Menace.

Senator Joseph McCarthy's appearance on the anti-communist scene in early 1950, charging that 205 card-carrying communists were working in the State

Department, proved an unexpected boon to Hoover. He was energetically tracking communists in secret. But he saw McCarthy, with his many unsupported allegations of communist infiltration, as “a loose-cannon threat to the anticommunist cause,” in Gage’s words. Among other things, McCarthy wanted the FBI to reveal secrets about communists that would have betrayed sources and methods. When Hoover resisted on the grounds that the information could be used to “smear innocent individuals” and foment witch hunts, liberals and progressives praised his professionalism and discretion. Dwight D. Eisenhower followed suit in his successful effort to destroy McCarthy in 1954 by invoking Hoover as the trustworthy anti-communist alternative. “In one of the most contentious political spectacles in American history,” Gage writes, “Hoover’s greatness emerged as the one point of consensus.”

McCarthy’s flameout was the crowning moment in Hoover’s three-decade effort to establish the FBI as an institution above politics that the public could count on to act responsibly in secret to keep the nation safe. Gage emphasizes the colossal skill required to maintain this image and the bipartisan support that went along with it. She also notes the “surprising degree of nimbleness and creativity” he showed in responding to shifting law-enforcement and national-security challenges. He kept his agents above reproach and his agency at the forefront of criminal and intelligence science. He shrewdly managed alliances with presidents and in Congress, and with the press. He was gifted at selective restraint—in declining to take actions that might jeopardize his political support, and in saying “no” when he thought presidential requests for secret political intelligence went too far. Not least, he kept senior executive and congressional figures generally informed about his invasive operations (though not so much about his legally dubious tactics) while keeping them secret from a public whose trust he counted on for his success.

In the 1960s, “the American consensus that had once sustained” Hoover fell apart “as the country split over issues of race and civil rights, ‘law and order,’ and the war in Vietnam,” Gage writes. Race relations, she shows, tripped up Hoover the most. He was a lifelong racist who nonetheless, starting in the ’40s and continuing into the ’60s, “mounted aggressive campaigns against the most extreme elements of the segregationist South, especially the Ku Klux Klan.” Hoover disliked lawbreaking and disorder,

she concludes, more than he liked segregation. At the same time, she calls attention to Hoover's significantly more extensive campaigns against civil-rights leaders and activists.

Hoover singled out MLK in particular, whom he considered "degenerate" and hypocritical. He had solid (though undisclosable) evidence that a close adviser to King, Stanley Levison, as well as the man who ran the New York office of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Jack O'Dell, had clandestine ties to the Communist Party. In July 1962, after Hoover distributed an anonymous note about O'Dell's communist past to southern newspapers, King falsely downplayed O'Dell's role in the SCLC and his knowledge of O'Dell's communist leanings. The following year, Hoover persuaded President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to warn King off these men. But King demurred in the absence of evidence.

From the November 1970 issue: The government and Martin Luther King

Hoover waited until Lyndon B. Johnson had been elected, in 1964, to call King out, which he did a month after King had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Hoover bluntly told a women's offshoot of the National Press Club, "I consider King to be the most notorious liar in the country." His shocked aide urged him to take the remarks off the record, but Hoover encouraged the reporters to publish. He was itching for a fight, and he thought he had cause. Instead his remark turned out to be his biggest public blunder since his days in the Radical Division. A firestorm ensued. (A few days later, the FBI initiated its secret blackmail and rumor campaign against King, which of course would have caused a conflagration had it been known.)

The ever more discordant civil-rights movement, the New Left, Vietnam protesters, and Black nationalists had weak ties, if any, to the Soviet Union, and these "subversives" had broader public support than the dissidents the younger Hoover had once pursued. Yet as social order broke down, Hoover went after them all with public jabs and secret campaigns. Generating political consensus in this context was far harder now that his views about threats worth addressing were so much further from the mainstream. When the seamy secret side of the FBI's methods began to leak out, his signature massaging of allies simply didn't work.

The FBI cannot escape Hoover's shadow and the suspicion that it wields illegitimate power—especially when it investigates senior political figures.

The scale of Hoover's electronic surveillance was becoming clear to the public by 1966. Its political thrust was exposed in 1971, with the release of documents that had been stolen from an FBI outlet in Media, Pennsylvania. They revealed for the first time that the bureau was monitoring, disrupting, and neutralizing left-wing activists. For "liberals and leftists," Gage writes, that "marked the end of whatever was still left of Hoover's reputation as the limited-state, good-government figure that they had once embraced and admired." After Hoover died suddenly on May 2, 1972, he received "a grand spectacle of bipartisan tribute," as Gage puts it, primarily for his earlier successes and long service. But after the shocking revelations of the 1975 Church Committee investigations into U.S. domestic-intelligence practices, he "emerged as one of history's great villains, perhaps the most universally reviled American political figure of the twentieth century."

James Comey kept on his desk in the director's office a copy of the one-page October 1963 memorandum from Hoover to Attorney General Kennedy seeking permission to conduct the initial electronic surveillance of King. The only reasons cited were King's belief in Marxism and his possible connections to communist influences. Comey made the memo the centerpiece of a seminar for new FBI recruits about the bureau's cruel campaign against King, and often spoke about it with colleagues. "By remembering and being open and truthful about our mistakes," Comey explained in his first memoir, "we reduce the chance we will repeat them."

Comey's FBI was a world away from Hoover's. Reforms over the years have ensured that the FBI follows elaborate rules on investigations and electronic surveillance, and is subject to oversight by federal courts, executive-branch watchdogs, and congressional committees. The director's term is limited to 10 years. And a powerful norm has been established that the FBI must maintain strict independence from the president, in appearance and reality, to preserve the bureau's credibility when its investigations affect an administration's interests.

Yet for all of that, the FBI cannot escape Hoover's shadow and the suspicion that it wields illegitimate power—especially when it investigates senior

political figures. The bureau made mistakes in its handling of Hillary Clinton's email mess and of Donald Trump's incessantly questionable behavior that cost it credibility. But we fundamentally misunderstand the quandary the FBI faces if we think that these investigations would have been viewed with much more confidence had it avoided those missteps.

The modern FBI lacks Hoover's tools for managing its investigative legitimacy. Hoover sustained this legitimacy by, in essence, insulating the bureau from outside questioning that would have exposed its excesses. He did favors for presidents and other politicians, who backed him up in a pinch. The law-bound, post-Hoover FBI must (and does) operate at arm's length from politicians. Adversarial eyeballs in the executive branch and in Congress, and a much less pliant press than in Hoover's day, mean that secrecy is harder to maintain. These institutions scrutinize every mistake, many of which acquire outsize significance because they are viewed through the villain-Hoover lens. As recent events show, and as Hoover himself discovered, sustaining broad public support can be impossible in fractious times.

Public investigations of senior political figures obviously pose the most difficult challenge. Charges of politicization are inevitable, and the stakes could not be higher. Though Hoover spied on politicians, he never launched a public inquiry of a senior national figure, and would have done everything in his power to avoid that. Such a step would have undermined the political support that allowed him to pursue what he deemed real threats.

The reformed FBI can't avoid such politically divisive investigations. It gets referrals from inspectors general and pressure from Congress and the press, and must follow attorney-general guidelines in assessing whether and how to proceed. And whatever decision the bureau makes, its response is unavoidably seen by half the country as political. This is not a recent development. Recall, for example, FBI Director Louis Freeh's rocky relationship with President Bill Clinton. Watergate, which unfolded during the bureau's transition away from the Hoover era, highlights how much has changed: The pre-reform FBI did solid work, aided by "Deep Throat" Deputy Director Mark Felt's Hoover-esque political leaks. The bureau acted with broad (and probably unrepeatable) political consensus grounded in

revulsion not just at Watergate, but at Vietnam and other executive-branch failures going back a decade.

The FBI has never been in a tougher spot than in the Trump era. Many Democrats haven't liked the FBI since at least 2016, when they concluded that the organization was trying to elect Trump, who, just as wrongly, believed that the bureau was out to stop his election. The next five years of Trump's relentless, unparalleled FBI-bashing drove Republicans in our tribal era into an anti-FBI frenzy. Democrats support the bureau today, but that is unlikely to last should the FBI present evidence of convictable crimes by Hunter Biden.

The FBI's half-century effort since Hoover's death to remove itself from politics was necessary and admirable. America needs a widely trusted, competent, and reliable federal law-enforcement and domestic-intelligence agency to keep us safe from ever-morphing threats at home and abroad. But as the FBI's longest-serving director knew well, cultivating an apolitical ethos supplements, but can't replace, having many friends in high places and controlling the secrecy system. The ghost of J. Edgar Hoover likely smiles at the irony that his beloved bureau has become too independent and too open to be trusted in hyper-partisan America.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline "When J. Edgar Hoover Was a National Hero."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/j-edgar-hoover-fbi-influence/671900/

The Grimke Sisters and the Indelible Stain of Slavery

The abolitionists have long been portrayed as heroes. A new book views them, and their family, in a different light.

by Drew Gilpin Faust



“Our family, Black and white.” For the slaveholding class of the old South, it was a familiar trope, one intended to convey both mastery and benevolence, to hide the reality of raw power and exploitation behind an ideology of paternalistic concern and natural racial hierarchy. There was

profound irony in the white South's choice of this image, for the words were far from simply figurative: They revealed the very truths they were designed to hide. One can see in the slave schedules of the 1850 and 1860 censuses the many entries marked "mulatto," individuals the census taker regarded as mixed race, rather than Black. This was the literal family produced by the slave system before the Civil War—children conceived from the sexual dominance of free white men over enslaved Black women in liaisons that ranged from a single encounter of rape to extended relationships, such as the decades-long connection between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.

Few of these ties were ever acknowledged; white fathers held their own children in bondage, in most cases treating them little differently from their other human possessions. Of the many excruciating and all-but-unfathomable dimensions of American slavery, its manifold assaults on kinship seem among the most inhumane. What was the nature of "slavery in the family," a designation that today seems both twisted and oxymoronic? How did individuals and families survive its emotional distortions and its insertion of racial subjugation into the most intimate—and precious—aspects of life?

The Civil War diarist Mary Chesnut, born on a South Carolina plantation, once famously remarked of this widespread denial:

> The mulattos one sees in every family … resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.

Yet that denial had its limits and its exceptions, and the historical record offers occasional glimpses into the tortured dynamics of families "Black and white." Annette Gordon-Reed's acclaimed work on Jefferson ranks as one of the most notable of these explorations. But the history of another southern lineage, which Kerri K. Greenidge examines in her new book, *The Grimkes: The Legacy of Slavery in an American Family*, is perhaps even more revealing of the way human bondage shaped and deformed families, as well as the lives of those within them.

The Grimkes of South Carolina were in no sense representative of the South's slaveholding class. The decision of Sarah and Angelina, two daughters of the wealthy planter John Grimke and his wife, Mary, to confront the horror of slavery and move north in the 1820s to become abolitionists and feminists illustrates in its singularity the difficulties of escaping the grip of a system that compromised every white person connected to it. Two of their mixed-race nephews, Archibald and Francis, sons of their brother Henry and the enslaved Nancy Weston, emerged as major figures in Black political and social life after the Civil War. They were embraced and supported by their activist aunts, who had not known of their existence during their early years of bondage, which included brutal beatings and abuse from their white half brother, another of Sarah and Angelina's nephews. But the exceptional nature of the story—and of the individuals within it—casts into dramatic relief how the slave system could mold lives across generations.

The two sisters came to share an abhorrence of the slave system on which their family's wealth and position depended.

John Grimke, the patriarch, sired 14 white children and held more than 300 enslaved workers on his extensive properties in the South Carolina Low Country and in Charleston. Sarah, his sixth child, born in 1792, displayed remarkable intellectual gifts from an early age, but such talents were not welcomed in a girl. While her father permitted her to teach herself using the books in his library, he denied her the education provided to her brothers. Sarah described taking a "malicious satisfaction" in defying both her parents and South Carolina law by teaching her "little waiting maid" and numbers of other enslaved workers to read and write. When Sarah's mother gave birth to her last child, in 1805, Sarah insisted on being named the baby's godmother. Angelina would be her surrogate daughter.

From the April 2016 issue: The truth about abolition

Thirteen years apart, the two sisters came to share an abhorrence of the slave system on which their family's wealth and position depended. Angelina was particularly repelled by the institution's violence—the sound of painful cries from men, women, and even children being whipped; the lingering scars evident on the bodies of those who served her every day; the tales of the

dread Charleston workhouse that, for a fee, would administer beatings and various forms of torture out of sight of one's own household. Both Sarah and Angelina became deeply religious, rejecting the self-satisfied pieties of their inherited Episcopalian faith, but finding in Christian doctrine a foundation for their growing certainty about the "moral degradation" of southern society. In 1821, Sarah moved to Philadelphia and joined the Society of Friends; by the end of the decade, Angelina had joined her.

Philadelphia was a focal point of the growing antislavery movement, and the sisters were swept up in the ferment. Soon defying Quaker moderation on slavery just as they had defied their southern heritage, the Grimke sisters embraced William Lloyd Garrison and what was seen as the radicalism of abolition. In essays appearing in 1837 and 1838, Angelina and Sarah each set out the case for the liberation of women and enslaved people. They joined the Garrisonian lecture circuit, and Angelina developed a reputation as a sterling orator at a time when women were all but prohibited from the public stage. In 1838, Angelina married the abolitionist leader Theodore Dwight Weld in a racially integrated celebration that adhered to the free-produce movement, including no clothing or refreshments produced by enslaved labor. Weld and the sisters shared a household for most of the rest of their lives, and Sarah became a devoted caretaker of Angelina and Theodore's three children. Their opposition not just to slavery but to racial inequality and segregation, as well as their support for women's rights, placed them in the vanguard of reform and at odds with many other white abolitionists. With emancipation, they took up the cause of the freedpeople, which they pursued until they died, Sarah in 1873, Angelina in 1879.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the sisters' understanding of their family changed. Angelina came across a notice in an 1868 issue of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* referring to a meeting at Lincoln University where a Black student named Grimke had delivered an admirable address. She wrote to the young man to ask if he might be the former slave of one of her brothers. Archibald replied that he was in fact her brother's son, offered details of his early life, and told her about his siblings, Francis, known as Frank, and John. Angelina responded that she was not surprised but found his letter "deeply … touching." She could not change the past, she observed, but "our work is in the present." She was glad they had taken the name of

Grimke; she hoped they might redeem the family’s honor. “Grimke,” she wrote,

> was once one of the noblest names of Carolina … You, my young friends, now bear this once honored name—I charge you most solemnly by your upright conduct, and your life-long devotion to the eternal principles of justice and humanity and religion to lift this name out of the dust, where it now lies, and set it once more among the princes of our land.

Thus began a relationship in which the Weld-Grimkes provided financial assistance to Archibald at Harvard Law School and Francis at Princeton Theological Seminary and delivered unrelenting exhortations to prove their excellence and worth, both as Grimkes and as representatives of their race. John, seen by his aunts as less talented and less deserving than his brothers, became estranged from his family. Francis and Archibald achieved notable success—Archibald as a founder and vice president of the NAACP and later the American consul to Santo Domingo, Frank as a prominent member of the clergy and the Black elite of Washington, D.C. Relationships among the white and Black Grimke families were not always easy; Frank in particular found his white relatives oppressively demanding and “unaccustomed to the ways of colored people,” and after a time he declined to accept their support. But it seems telling that Frank nevertheless called his only child Theodora, and Archibald chose to name his daughter Angelina.

The remarkable story of the Grimkes was long neglected by historians, and the way it has come to be told reveals a great deal about how we have chosen to understand the past. Until the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s prompted scholars to look anew at the narrative of Black freedom, abolitionists were regarded as dangerous radicals, to be deplored rather than acclaimed. The likes of Weld and Garrison, not to mention the women who moved outside their assigned sphere to join them in opposition to slavery, were cast as reckless fanatics, endangering the peace of the nation. But amid appreciation for mid-20th-century activists, perspectives shifted on those who had come before.

Abolitionists turned from demons into heroes, and their lives and struggles aroused widespread and sympathetic scholarly inquiry. Similarly, Black-

freedom and women's-liberation movements spawned new fields of Black and women's history, making the Grimke sisters and their nephews a focus of exploration. The fate of the first modern scholarly treatment of the Grimkes is illuminating. Gerda Lerner, who was a founder of the National Organization for Women and became a superstar in the nascent field of women's history, wrote her Columbia doctoral dissertation on the Grimke sisters. She published the study as a book in 1967, a moment when the civil-rights movement was well under way but the women's movement was just emerging. She titled it *The Grimké Sisters From South Carolina*, with the subtitle, at her publisher's insistence, *Rebels Against Slavery* instead of her preferred *Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition*. "'Women's rights,'" her editor told her, "was not a concept that would sell books." By 1971, when a paperback edition appeared, the growth of feminism permitted the subtitle she had originally intended, along with a blurb from Gloria Steinem hailing the sisters as "pioneers of Women's Liberation."

We have projected onto the Grimkes' story questions that have troubled us about ourselves and our racial past.

Drawing on a flush of historical work that included scholarly biographies of the two nephews, Mark Perry in 2001 published a study that considered Black and white Grimkes together. His book explored the lives of "four extraordinary individuals"—Archibald and Frank as well as the sisters. *Lift Up Thy Voice: The Sarah and Angelina Grimké Family's Journey From Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders* was unabashedly celebratory—designed to inspire a general audience by underscoring the possibility for racial enlightenment and for connections across the color line. "We see in their troubles our own," he wrote of the family; "in their triumphs our hope; and in their history, the history of our nation."

The Grimkes proved fodder for drama and fiction as well. In 2014, the novelist Sue Monk Kidd released *The Invention of Wings*, a tale that imagined the intertwined lives of Sarah Grimke and an enslaved girl presented to her on her 11th birthday. Oprah designated it a Book Club selection, declaring that it "heightened my sense of what it meant to be a woman—slave or free," and it debuted at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list.

The Grimkes' story has served as a kind of cultural Rorschach test. We have projected onto it questions that have troubled us about ourselves and our racial past and found in it the promise of transcending the forces that seem to trap humans in the circumstances of their era. We have, as Perry wrote, seen in it our own anxieties, hopes, and history: The sisters have represented the possibility of moral redemption and social transformation; their nephews have embodied the myth and reality of personal uplift as well as social conscience and commitment. All four defied the expectations and limitations of their origins. For more than half a century, as the rights of Black people and women have advanced, we have rediscovered and then lionized the Grimkes.

The latest addition to the Grimke literature marks a new departure. Greenidge's *The Grimkes* is not a story about heroes. Instead, it is intended as an exploration of trauma and tragedy. Like the studies of the Grimkes that have preceded it, the book reflects the challenges of our own time, but Greenidge, who is an assistant professor at Tufts, regards these not with optimism about possibilities for racial progress but with something closer to despair. She set out, she declares in her introduction, to write "a family biography that resonates in the lives of those who struggle with the personal and political consequences of raising children and families in the aftermath of the twenty-first-century betrayal of the radical human rights promise of the 1960s."

Although earlier treatments hailed the sisters' successes, Greenidge finds these vitiated by Sarah and Angelina's unacknowledged "complicity in the slave system they so eloquently spoke against." Sarah's "dissatisfaction was possible only because of the very privileges denied to the numerous Black people who cultivated her family's cotton and maintained their household." The "feel-good stories" of Archibald's and Francis's achievements have ignored "the superficialities of the colored elite" of which they became proud members, and have failed to call the nephews to account for their obsessions with skin color and class hierarchies in the Black community.

As the pastor of Washington's Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, Frank served a Black "professional, political, and business elite" that "shielded their congregation from the Black masses" by means of a rigorous admission process. Reverend Grimke "cultivated a conservative culture of racial

respectability” that resulted, Greenidge finds, in the purge of “less well-heeled (and darker-skinned) members from Fifteenth Street’s rolls.” Archibald was unable to transcend his experience as a “fetishized Black wunderkind” during years spent in “neo-abolitionist New England”—at Harvard and as a young lawyer in Boston. His service as the consul to Santo Domingo, often cited as a badge of remarkable accomplishment for one born in slavery, came “at the expense of the African-descended subjects living under American empire.” Greenidge mentions only briefly Archibald’s role in leading the NAACP’s Washington efforts to combat President Woodrow Wilson’s segregation of the federal government. But she notes disapprovingly that despite “his genuine belief in racial equality,” he “neither argued for racial revolution nor criticized the color consciousness, materialism, and social conservatism of his fellow colored elite.” Even as Archibald witnessed the steady escalation of Jim Crow, she contends, he remained too close to white society and white power to effectively resist it.

Greenidge is the author of an earlier, prizewinning study of another leader of the postbellum Black community, William Monroe Trotter, who had an often close but fraught relationship with Archibald Grimke. The two ultimately broke sharply over Trotter’s more radical, less accommodationist stance, disseminated through his paper, the Boston *Guardian*. Trotter, Greenidge writes, “provided a voice for thousands of disenchanted, politically marginalized black working people” for whom Grimke’s efforts in the “politically moderate camp of colored elite” had little significance. In Greenidge’s portrayal of this conflict, and in her broader interpretation, her allegiances seem clear.

Greenidge leaves the stature of Sarah, Angelina, Archie, and Frank diminished, but she offers an enriched view of the extended Black Grimke family. Foregrounding the nephews’ enslaved mother with a chapter of her own, she provides a valuable treatment of the free Black Forten family—the prosperous Philadelphia clan to which Frank’s wife, Charlotte, belonged—and highlights the crucial role of Black women in the abolitionist struggle. A third-generation antislavery activist, Charlotte served as a teacher of the freedpeople in the Sea Islands, and her two 1864 articles on her experiences there made her the first Black writer to be published in *The Atlantic*.

From the May 1864 issue: Charlotte Forten Grimké's "Life on the Sea Islands"

The Grimkes begins and ends with a portrait of Angelina Weld-Grimke, the only child of Archibald and his white wife and an often-overlooked figure in the Grimke lineage. Here she serves as an embodiment of the troubled legacy Greenidge seeks to portray. Abandoned by her mother when she was 7, Angelina, who lived until 1958, became a writer, struggling as a mixed-race woman, a Grimke, and a lesbian to confront the realities and tragedies of race in her own and the nation's heritage. Her best-known work is a play titled *Rachel*, centered on a brutal lynching that leads the victim's daughter to decide she will never bring children into such a cruelly racist world. *Rachel* became a "vehicle for civil rights activism," but Greenidge emphasizes that the play also "reveals an artist who was as concerned with intergenerational trauma as she was with political protest." Angelina's life and work, Greenidge argues, gave expression to the failures—and the "existential rage"—of a Black elite whose narrative of "Black Excellence and racial exceptionalism" had rendered them politically "impotent" and "irrelevant" in the face of the violence of lynching and the imposition of Jim Crow.

At a time when we are confronted once again by an assault on rights long presumed to have been obtained and guaranteed—including voting and affirmative action—Greenidge has found in the Grimkes' experiences a world chillingly like our own. Just as the promise of emancipation and Radical Reconstruction evaporated into Jim Crow, so we live, she writes, in an era when the heralded accomplishments of the civil-rights movement are being overturned and its promise abandoned. Upbeat stories of Black achievements cannot, she insists, counterbalance the wider reality of enduring oppression and inequality.

In recent years, considerable attention has been directed by scholars of history and literature to the question of slavery's "afterlife," to the assessment of its impact long after its legal demise. Greenidge embraces this perspective as she connects the injustices of the present with their roots. She finds their origins embedded not just in the strictures of society and law, but in the human psychology formed in the families that racism has so

profoundly shaped. Our nation's racial trauma lives on. The arc of history bends slowly—or perhaps, Greenidge seems to suggest, hardly at all.

This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline "Slavery in the Family."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/the-grimkes-legacy-of-slavery-book-review/671901/

| Section menu | Main menu |

Departments

- The Commons: Why Shouldn’t Girls Outdo Boys in School?
- An Ode to Pull-Ups

Why Shouldn’t Girls Outdo Boys in School?

Readers respond to an argument in our October issue.



Redshirt the Boys

Boys should start school a year later than girls, Richard V. Reeves wrote in the October issue.

Speaking as a 75-year-old man, I completely agree with Richard Reeves’s “Redshirt the Boys.” To avoid one more year of child care, my parents started me in first grade at age 5. I turned 6 in late October, making me one

of the youngest boys in every class through high school. I was athletically gifted, but growth-wise almost a year behind all my classmates. I was bullied regularly. Intellectually, my feelings of inferiority left me struggling to remain interested in any subject other than math.

Reeves's article made me wonder how much smoother my life would have been if I had been "redshirted" for a year. I hope someday a "Redshirt the Boys" law gets passed that will help boys become men, and eventually put a damper on our current level of toxic masculinity.

Michael Sparkman
Albuquerque, N.M.

I have spent 36 years as a teacher and in leadership roles in schools across New Zealand, Australia, and the U.K. Though I was educated, trained, and began my career in coeducational environments, I have now spent 32 years at boys' schools.

While redshirting might be an option for some families seeking to address the difference in boys' and girls' brain-development trajectories, it is certainly not the only one, nor is it the best way to address the personal needs of each individual boy.

By its very nature, redshirting is a heavy-hammer approach, bound by the rigid restrictions of the school calendar. Children mature at different rates and at different times. Redshirting boys by a year might be advantageous for some and detrimental to others. Some might benefit from a delay of six months or eight weeks, but the school calendar simply does not have the subtlety to adapt to this.

Another option is boys' schools, which intentionally meet the developmental needs of boys. In and out of class, these schools can take time to provide experiences that build the relationships, respect, and trust that help boys thrive.

Tom Batty
Executive Director, the International Boys' Schools Coalition

Windsor, Berkshire, United Kingdom

Reeves argues that girls doing better than boys in school is a problem, and that the solution is to give boys an advantage by starting them a year older. Can anyone seriously believe that having most of the boys in class be a year older and a head taller than the girls would actually be better for the girls? Millennia of evidence suggest otherwise—that the boys would lord it over the girls.

If students are going to be ranked, why should it not be women at the top? If girls' success makes boys feel threatened, it's because boys have been trained to expect the opposite. In fact they should be trained from childhood to understand that girls are smart and serious. Doubtless, individual parents with financial means will redshirt to give their sons an advantage, but it should certainly not be a social policy to encourage redshirting and tip the scales in favor of boys, rather than figuring out how to actually improve education for a future of equality.

Nancy E. Abrams
Santa Cruz, Calif.

Reeves fails to mention that nearly all of the high-paying jobs available to people with a high-school diploma or less are in male-dominated fields: electricians, plumbers, construction workers, brickmasons, steelworkers. Professions dominated by women with a high-school diploma or less include those in such low-paying fields as child care, retail, and elder care. That which is "female" or "feminine" is coded as "low value" by our society. Boys who fall behind in school can find great careers as mechanics, patrol officers, and wind-turbine technicians. The same options aren't available to women—at least not without enduring sexual harassment. Maybe instead of "redshirting" boys, we should work on fixing the oppressive patriarchal system that dominates our culture.

Laura Weinstein
New York, N.Y.

I don't see why a market-driven society such as ours should have a problem with girls doing better in school than boys. Egalitarianism is a utopian ideal. Let the children compete and let the chips fall where they may.

William McClanahan
San Francisco, Calif.

Richard V. Reeves replies:

I'm grateful to all those who took the time to comment on my essay. The goal of the policy I propose is not to "tip the scales in favor of boys," as some fear. Rather, it is to level the playing field in the spirit of equity given the developmental differences between the sexes. It is indeed something of a "heavy-hammer approach," as Tom Batty points out, but that's true of any policy using chronological age as a proxy for the best time to start school.

I strongly disagree with the idea that the academic struggles of boys, especially those from poorer backgrounds, are inconsequential because men can get good jobs anyway. Laura Weinstein writes that "boys who fall behind in school can find great careers as mechanics, patrol officers, and wind-turbine technicians." Not so much anymore. These jobs may not require a four-year degree, but they typically require some postsecondary credentials. Helping boys do better at school is now essential to helping men do better in life. In my book Of Boys and Men*, I also argue for a recruitment drive for male teachers, and more investment in vocational training—both of which will be of particular benefit to boys and men.*

From the Archives

In "Where My Characters Come From," Haruki Murakami explains how he goes about populating his novels: "As I write, a kind of axis forms that makes possible the appearance of certain characters, and I go ahead and fit one detail after another into place, like iron scraps attaching to a magnet." This "unconscious and intuitive process" is the only option. "I have to do it like this, or my characters will turn out unnatural and dead."

In her 1933 *Atlantic* essay, "Confessions of a Novelist," Edith Wharton described her creative process in strikingly similar terms. "If the situation takes the lead," she wrote, "I leave it lying about, as it were, in a quiet place, and just wait till the characters creep stealthily up and wriggle themselves into it. All I seem to have done is to say, at the outset: 'This thing happened—but to whom?'" Eventually, the characters "begin to speak within me with their own voices."

Like Murakami, Wharton found that ignoring "these people who haunt my brain" was a recipe for failure. Her characters appeared to her already named; even attempting to change those names ended fatally. "Any character I unchristened instantly died on my hands," she wrote. Nearing the end of her career, Wharton said that she had finally "gained enough mastery … to be able to effect the change." But, she admitted, "even now, when I do, I have to resort to *piqûres* and oxygen."

— **Amy Weiss-Meyer**, *Deputy Managing Editor*

Behind the Cover

In "Monuments to the Unthinkable," Clint Smith writes about what the U.S. can learn from how Germany remembers the Holocaust. Smith describes the German artist Gunter Demnig's Stolperstein project, which comprises more than 90,000 "stumbling stones" in 30 European countries, each of which commemorates a person persecuted by the Nazis.

Read: The story of Marion Ehrlich

The Stolperstein on our cover was photographed in Berlin; it is set into the cobblestones outside the apartment where Marion Ehrlich, a teenager, lived. The Nazis closed the Jewish school Ehrlich attended in June 1942; afterward, she performed forced labor at a Jewish cemetery. She was soon deported, at the age of 14. She died in Auschwitz.

— **Luise Stauss**, *Director of Photography*

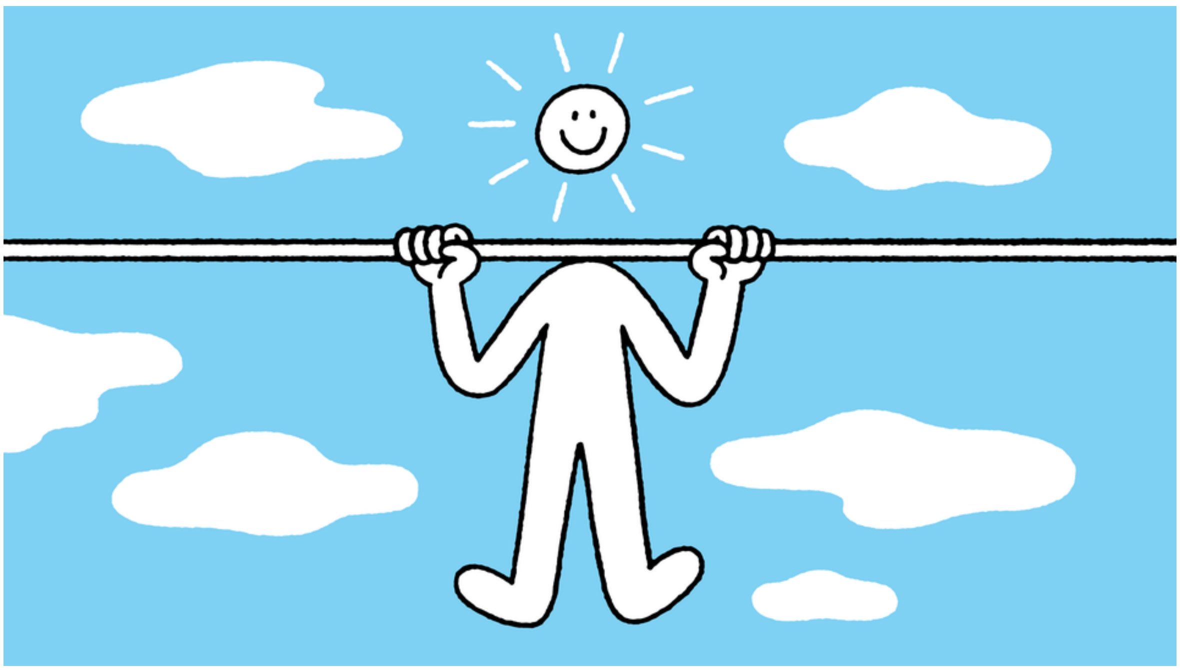
This article appears in the December 2022 print edition with the headline "The Commons." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/the-commons/671890/

An Ode to Pull-Ups

It’s you versus you.

by James Parker



Who do I think I am, dangling off this bar?

I think I’m an ape. I think I’m an aerialist. I think I’m Jason Momoa. I think I’m a 54-year-old man with a dodgy shoulder, experiencing—to the pound, to the ounce—the precise terms of my contract with gravity. That’s one thing you can always say for the pull-up: You’re lifting your own weight.

Its first cousin is of course the push-up. But the push-up has no verticality. A blur of ground, or of floor, bounces madly back and forth in front of your face. And besides, your feet are taking some of the load—so as far as body weight goes, that means you’re bearing (just Googled this) only 64 percent.

No, for the true self-haul, the full load of who you are, it has to be the pull-up.

You do pull-ups alone, very alone, but maybe a couple of your pull-up brothers are there too—grimly contemplative, walking in loose circles around the bar, shrugging and sighing. Pull-up talk is minimal and poetic. The other day I asked a big dude if I could jump in between his sets. He took out one earbud as I repeated the question. “Get at it,” he said. “Get some.”

Are you wondering how many I can do? I can do eight. I can do 60. I can do 102, in 13 sets, over a period of two and a half days: sets of nine, sets of four, sets of nought. As for technique, I’ve invented my own grip—I call it the French Press. The point is, I do them. I do pull-ups, and they never get any easier. Still the same flutter of dismay as I stare up at the metal bar. Still the same sensation of wrenched brain cells as I jump and grab and heave.

But the pull-up cures me like no other exercise. It lifts me clear of my stews and stagnancies. It dramatizes my rising-above. Need a mood shifter, a circuit breaker? Do pull-ups. And do them outside. Nothing against gyms, or the pull-up bar installed over a doorway at home, but for the real pull-up effect, you want to be hoisting yourself into the sky. At the moment of maximum effort, you want to be silhouetted against infinity.

Then you drop to the earth, the sturdy and ever-supportive earth. There it is, and there you are. Ready.

This article appears in the [December 2022](#) print edition with the headline “Ode to Pull-Ups.”

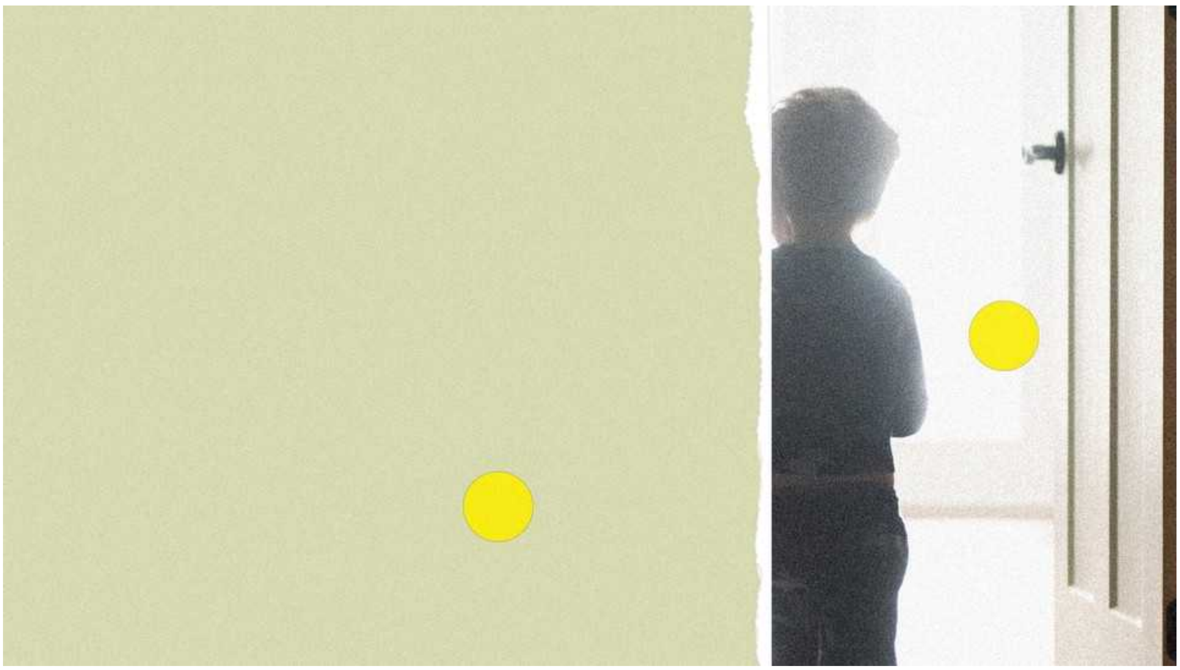
This article was downloaded by **calibre** from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/an-ode-to-pull-ups/671903/

Poetry

- **Stagger**

Stagger

by Linda Gregerson



Three, I thought,
                    or four at the most
          to judge
                    by all the signs we never

know we've socked away as mother
                    memory, maybe
          four,
                    no longer a toddler, but not

so far removed as would have
                    lengthened his stride and still
          a toddler-like ratio
                    of torso to head so I was

baffled why
was he walking like that was he
wounded there
was rubble in the street no

people no
others I mean who might
have picked him up and offered
comfort whoever it was

with the videocam preferring
to capture
footage instead how else
could the rest of us take it in.

The shot
was from behind, that is
the camera shot, but later
on the news which means

there must have been two of them,
real time, in the ravaged
town, with
cameras, they screened

the same five seconds, frontally.
I had not, said
the pilgrim in the underworld,
I had not thought death … undone …

*

The miracle is
that some of us should be allowed
to live at a distance from active
harm. Illusory distance, I'll

grant you. Still.
The slender man, for instance, fishing
cardboard from the Camden Council drop-off
bin, stout

cardboard, good for sleeping on,
he’s not about to cross the street and
demand my purse though
God knows in any rational world

the money I spent to pay for the chair that came
in the box would be his
already. His before
I walked in the shop to buy the

chair.
The sirens in the street last night,
they weren’t for me.
The fires are safely elsewhere.

For the moment,
I’ll grant you.

We’re told the asbestos has been removed.

*

You’ve seen with what wonder, if your life
has been a blessed one,
the youngest among us begin to explore
that friable boundary. Self

and world.
The perpetual astonishment
of moving parts. The toes
you can feel from both

sides when you
put them in your mouth.

And quickly in succession then:
the rolling over, four-part locomotion

in its apt improvisations, and at last
upright:
triumphant prospect of everything-at-
hand.

Long interval,
if all goes well, before the third part
of the riddle.
You may have seen,

if you've been blessed
to keep them long enough,
your older loved ones beginning to alter
their gait. Less

confident on stairs, uneven
pavement. And have thought,
as we are meant to do, *we are not here*
forever. This

was different. This
was something we hope only
to encounter in dithyrambs,
made stately by the chorus, concerning

a king or someone otherwise
likely
to be as guilty as we are. But
the boy was three.

Four at the most.
I'd thought
the masks they wore at Epidaurus were
hyperbole, meant chiefly to be seen

from the topmost seats.
But grief can do what art
can only bow before. The child was wild
with grief.

This poem appears in the December 2022 print edition.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/poem-linda-gregerson-stagger/671902/